

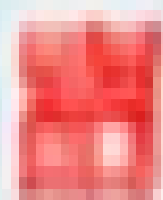


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Legend of the Cultivation God - Chapter 001-146

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Chapter 1: Reclaiming the land

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Reclaiming the land

An ordinary day, on a vast space of land where skies were clear and the sun shining brilliantly.

Suddenly, a ring-like object appeared in the sky out of nowhere, as though it has suddenly crossover from another dimension, and with great speed, shot towards the mountain peak, while carrying an eerie “wu wu” sound.

Following normal physics, when an object descends from the sky, it would be accompanied by a trail of copious gas followed by a deafening sound, as though it is announcing its arrival to everyone in the world.

However, in this particular case, the object only emitted some inaudible sound, before burying itself deeply into the mountains, where it was no longer noticeable. In such a short period of time, it did not capture the attention of any living being, even the birds that were nearby had no time to react. These frightened birds circled the sky for a few short whiles, before leaving the incident out of its mind. Without anyone knowing, this land had gained another mysterious object.

After countless of years, the wastelands became cultivated and large oceans receded into seas. The human population expanded, and the aforementioned mountain weathered into a knoll. In fact, many previously isolated areas had worn down into land which was suitable for human population. What kind of story would this mysterious ring bring? Zhang Xiaohua had a face as though he felt blessed by the gods, because right now, his eyes were firmly set upon the farmland before him as though it was a succulent piece of five-spice meat.

Instead of calling it a farmland, it would be more appropriate to call this land

as wasteland in the hills, because it was situated in the middle of a knoll where the gradient of the slope in this small area was not too steep. However, this piece of land was the result of the precious efforts by Zhang Xiaohua's father over the past two months.

Even though land was abundant in this area, not much of it could be used to cultivate crops. Hence, everyone is always thinking of finding good land that can be used to produce grains. Most people from the village would choose to find land closer to the river, but perhaps because Zhang Xiaohua's family was too poor to appease the elders, they had no choice but to choose a piece of land that is so far away.

The village that Zhang Xiaohua lived in was named Guo. Its total area consists of approximately 4 li* of even ground which was sandwiched between the mountains. The mountains were not tall; it would be more accurate to call them hillocks. A large river flowed across the village, and on the river was a small bridge that connected the roads. There were approximately forty-plus households in the Guo village, with half of them surnamed Guo and actually belonging to a small family clan situated at the center of the village.

*TN: li-500 meters

The village people were mostly simple yet realistic people, so most of the important village matters were decided by the Guo elders. Even though everyone was a member of the village, when it came to petty matters that require arbitration, the Guo elders would mostly side with those who were surnamed Guo. The best locations in the village had also been taken by the Guo households.

Nevertheless, village life was simple and peaceful, there was never a matter that could not be resolved so everyone was contented with the way things were.

Zhang Xiaohua's mother Guo Sufei was a member of the Guo clan, despite only receiving partial support and having long passed its "glory" days. By the time it reached his mother's generation, apart from Guo Sufei, there was no male descendant. Thus, to appease and take care of his grandfather, Guo San, Zhang Xiaohua's father, Zhang Cai, married into the Guo family.

The saying goes that a farming family depends on labor. However, Guo San had

no sons, and due to a series of unfortunate events, he could not fulfill his intention to adopt a boy from his relatives, and thus, the family's financial situation has fallen into dire straits. Fortunately, Zhang Cai did not disappoint him as a son-in-law. After entering the Guo household, he became an invaluable addition who not only worked in the fields, but also improved the standing of the family to above where it previously was.

A year later, Guo Sufei became pregnant, and Guo San gained a grandson, who was named Zhang Xiaolong. Seeing his grandson, Guo San felt relieved for the future of the family, but just as things were progressing in the right direction, a year later, Guo San became sick from overwork in his hard life, and never recovered since then.....

Illness to a poor family was like natural disaster that was impossible to recover from. To cure his father-in-law, Zhang Cai sold all the valuables in the house, but alas, he could not rescue Guo San's life which was like a candle flickering in the wind. Thus, when Zhang Xiaolong was two years old, Guo San finally passed away. The only thing Zhang Cai could look forward to was the birth of his second child. On his deathbed, Guo San decided to name the unborn child. If the child was a boy, he would be called Zhang Xiaohu, and if the child was a girl, she will be called Zhang Xiaohua. After Guo San passed away, Zhang Cai's mother-in-law also declined in health from her sorrow, and only after Zhang Xiaohu's birth did her spirits improve slightly which halted the series of misfortunes the household was facing.

A farmer's lifeblood was the land he farms on. Compared to Old Guo's times when there was not enough manpower, the small plot of land currently owned by the household could no longer sustain its increasing household size. Out of desperation, Zhang Cai took his sons and wife to the village elder, who eventually gave face to the deceased Guo San and granted the pitiable household a small plot of land near the river.

Zhang Xiaohua was born when his eldest brother was seven. That was when the family already had two and a half man's worth of manpower, and the difficulties of the past were easing up. Speaking of Zhang Xiaohua's birth, it was a noteworthy occasion because on that day, a two month drought finally had let up and ended with a heavy downpour on that very night he was born. The rain

became so heavy that the bridge was no longer passable, which was truly a frightening sight for the people who lived in the mountains. And when Guo Sufei was giving birth to Zhang Xiaohua, she saw flower petals enveloped the sky. Thus, Zhang Cai was full of anticipation towards Zhang Xiaohua, to the extent that he invited a learned man in the village to pick a name for his son. Names such as Zhang Wu, Zhang Ning, Zhang Xueyou, etc were thrown around, and after much consideration, Guo Sufei thought of the falling petals and was reminded of her deceased father, thus deciding on such a feminine name for her son.

TL: Xiaohua means little flower.

Xiaohua is currently twelve years old, and since the children in a farmer's household mature early, Xiaohua had already begun to join his father and two elder brothers in helping to toil the land. It was not that Zhang Cai did not consider sending his children to school to read and write, but the village was a small village with not many literate villagers, and thus they could not support a village school. The neighboring village belonged to a rather large clan, and the school fees that it required from the Guo village children were high. In the case of Xiaolong and Xiaohu, there was no need for any consideration because the family's situation was truly unable to support their education expenses. In Xiaohua's case, he did go to school for a few days, but according to the advice of his teacher, Xiaohua's potential in the literary path was limited, and that he would not be able to recognize more than a few words even if he were to put in all his efforts, much less become someone noteworthy. Zhang Cai weighed the options, took another glance at Xiaohua's pleading eyes and thick eyebrows, and finally decided to give up the pipedream of having an scholar in the household. Thus, he brought Xiaohua back to the village to farm. Rather, it was Xiaohua's mother who remembered the day when Xiaohua was born, and would time to time invite the literate people in the village to impart a little something to her son. Even though Xiaohua enjoyed following his brothers' footsteps in farming, but under the forced supervision of his mother, he was finally able to recognize some words and become the most learned in his household.

Today was the first day Xiaohua would farm by himself. His father had earlier told him that this plot of land would belong to him, and it can be considered to

be his future livelihood. Even though the land did not seem ideal for crop cultivation, Xiaohua remembered a scholar in the village who once said, “With a goal, one can begin. With a beginning, the road to success is halfway complete!” With success, the day when he reaches his goal will not be too far, and Xiaohua’s goal was to eat a succulent slice of five-spiced meat every day.

November marked the beginning of winter; the sun was still in the sky lending warmth to an otherwise cold weather. The winds blew from the hills, bringing a foreboding sense of winter, but Xiaohua’s attention was placed elsewhere. Carrying his hoe, he began to work continuously on this small plot of land. Firstly, he dug up a drain around the semi-oval boundary, and then began to clear up the small pebbles and rocks inside it. Next, he proceeded to remove the weeds, before turning the soil to loosen it so it could be used to cultivate crops. Farm work is naturally time-intensive, and when Xiaohua was done with the above mentioned tasks, it was already afternoon. Xiaohua stopped his work, wiped the sweat on his forehead, and walked towards where he came from where he retrieved a vat of water his mother prepared, taking continuous gulps to quench his thirst. Then, he stretched his body until he was comfortable. Even though he had previous farming experiences, because he was the smallest, his father and brothers would only leave the simpler tasks to him. Now, Xiaohua was more aware of the difficulties of farming, but when thinking of his grandmother and mother, and his family, he felt as though his efforts were worthwhile.

Xiaohua had previously learnt to read characters from the young students in the village. Instead of concentrating in his studies, Xiaohua would often listen about these scholars and their dreams for the future, which could lead him to dream about his own alternate fantasy. However, he was now faced with reality, and as he lowered his head to face the ground, he broke free from his daydream which was a small respite to his hard day of work. Just at that moment, his stomach rumbled in hunger. In the past, he would always have lunch at home with his mother, but this morning, his mother said that she would go over to bring his lunch. Looking at the time, she should be arriving soon.

Indeed, not long after, a sound came from downslope “Xiaohua.....come help mother”. To reach the plot of land, one had to follow a small winding slippery route up. The first time he came over to look at the land, he had already slipped

and fell.

Zhang Xiaohua quickly replied, "Mom, wait a moment. I will be down in a flash, do not come up by yourself." When Xiaohua reached the base of the hill, he saw his mother carrying a bamboo basket waiting by the roadside. Xiaohua took the basket, supported his mother while bringing her to climb upslope to sit on a rock, before opening the basket to look at the contents. In the basket, there was a bowl of five-spiced meat, as well as several pieces of plain buns. After sensibly asking after his mother, he began to tuck in.

Seeing Xiaohua devour the food, Guo Sufei felt slightly heartbroken and said, "Eat slowly, do not choke on and have some water."

"Mom, why did you make five-spiced meat today?" Xiaohua asked.

"Today is your first day of farm work. Your father has already informed me yesterday to prepare this for you as congratulations." Xiaohua's mother looked lovingly at her youngest son, "It has been hard on you. Although you are only twelve, when other children your age would be studying in the hall, you are here alone toiling the land"

"Mom, didn't you say that eldest brother started farm work at the age of ten? I am already fortunate enough. Furthermore, second brother has to share the land with eldest brother, while I already own a piece of land solely from myself, I cannot even begin to feel happy" Seeing his mother beginning to nag, he continued, "Grandmother, has she had the meat yet?"

"Your grandmother is already eighty-plus, how could she eat these things. I have already made some plain congee for her." Xiaohua's mother said, "Only after eating so much did you remember to care for your grandmother. To think that she was only thinking of you the whole morning....."

Xiaohua rubbed his head in embarrassment; he had indeed forgotten to consider the feelings of his grandmother.

Speaking of Xiaohua's grandmother, a grimace formed over Guo Sufei's face. As the days passed by, her children grew up, and her mother's body had grown weaker considerably. Even though hitting eighty was rare among farm-folks, who would not wish to live slightly longer? Recently, Xiaohua's grandmother has turned blind, and despite her and her husband's persuasion, she refused to see a

doctor, complaining that her loss of vision was a natural part of aging, and that money could be better spent elsewhere.

Seeing Xiaohua finish his meal and water, Guo Sufei said, “Xiaohua, end your work earlier today so that your grandmother can see you sooner. I will still need to visit your father and brothers.”

Xiaohua was surprised, and replied, “Mom, I have already eaten all that five-spiced meat, what will father and brother eat?”

“It is okay, there are still other dishes. Remember to end your work earlier, and try not catch a cold” Guo Sufei lovingly caressed Xiaohua’s head, as though he was still a tender child.

Zhang Xiaohua supported his mother down the knoll, and as he looked at his mother’s back, he felt shame in his heart. How could he have eaten all the five-spiced meat by himself?

Chapter 2: Digging a well

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Digging a well

Even though the mountains were cold in the afternoon, Zhang Xiaohua enthusiasm was only growing hotter. Nevertheless, the progress he made was still less compared to the morning's worth of work. There were a lot of rocks on the wasteland, many of them were buried deep in the ground and were not easy to pry. By the time the sun set and twilight arrived, Zhang Xiaohua has only shifted away a few larger rocks, even hurting his hand in the process, especially at his pulicue, which hurt even more whenever it came into contact with the cold wind.

He was still a child after all.

Raising his head to look at the plot of wasteland that he had worked on for the entire day, despite feeling reluctant, Zhang Xiaohua knew it was time to return home. He then picked up his hoe and water container and started to head towards home. The sky has turned dark, and if he had chosen to stay, his father and brothers would come over to look for him, and his grandmother would worry.

There was some distance between the plot of wasteland and his home. Otherwise, his mother would not have needed to bring over his lunch. As he walked along the hilly path, despite being tired, Zhang Xiaohua mood was exceptionally good. His father had already forewarned him that reclaiming the land would require much significant time, and today was only going to be the beginning. Later on, he would still need to loosen the rockbed into soil, plant the seedlings, water the growing crops... Watering the crops! The land was so high in altitude, and was so far from the river, how could he water his crops if there was

no water source nearby? Why had he not thought of this earlier? When this problem came into his mind, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but increase his pace.

When he entered the village boundaries, the sky had already turned pitch-black, but there were still many youths playing around. Seeing Xiaohua carry his hoe, a few of the more familiar youth could not help but inquire about his work, thus, Xiaohua had no choice but to answer each and every question. It seems that reclaiming land in the knolls was a significant event in a village which faced scarcity in grains. However, Xiaohua appeared absent-minded, which the other youths attributed to tiredness, and they did not continue to pester him, letting Xiaohua return home.

Zhang Xiaohua's house was in the southern part of the village, and according to fengshui, it was not a very good place. Nevertheless, the area was quite large, and after Zhang Cai's blood and sweat, he built a small courtyard. The fence around the courtyard was not high, and was made of inexpensive yellow mud, so outsiders would look over the barrier easily. From afar, Zhang Xiaohua could see his grandmother holding on to her walking stick while waiting at the gate entrance. Due to her poor vision, his grandmother could not leave the house as and when she likes, and the reason for her waiting at the fence door was to welcome her youngest grandson. Hearing the sound of footsteps that gradually grew louder, a smile grew on her face as she asked, "Xiaohua, you finally returned. Was today tiring?" Zhang Xiaohua hastened his pace to complete the last few steps, put down the hoe and water container, and supported his grandmother's arm as he replied, "Not tired at all, Grandmother. It is not as if I have never done farmwork before anyway." Grandmother held Xiaohua's hands in relief. "Our Xiaohua has grown into an adult, grandmother is a muddlehead has forgotten." His grandmother just so happened to brush against his purlicue, which caused Xiaohua to suck his breath involuntarily. Despite not making any noise, his grandmother was astute enough to tell, and said loudly, "Xiaocai, come and look at your son." Zhang Xiaohua's father actually returned not much earlier, and was currently at the courtyard washing up. Hearing his mother-in-law, he walked over and looked carefully.

"It is no big deal, mother. Xiaohua was so hardworking that his hands cracked from overwork. It will be fine in a few days."

“Should we go to the Old Chen in the village for some ointment?”

As she was asking, Guo Sufei walked out from the house carrying some stuff, and said, “There is no need, mother. Didn’t we get some for Xiaohu to use recently? There is still a bit left from then. When Xiaohua sleeps tonight, I shall apply some on him, and it would be better the very next day. The weather has turned cold, and the wind has picked up. I will bring the rice over soon. Xiaohua, help me support your grandmother home.”

Zhang Xiaohua carefully supported his grandmother back into the house, leaving the water scarcity problem right at the back of his head.

After dinner, his parents were carefully weaving baskets under a small light, while the three siblings were at another side helping out. Zhang Cai then asked Zhang Xiaohua about his progress in the fields.

“Working alone is indeed slow, after Xiaohu finish helping out Xiaolong with the field beside the river, I will ask him to go over to give a hand.”

Zhang Xiaolong also said, “Do not rush, Xiaohua. Once we are done, father and I will go over to help as well, so the land should be done before winter.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Why would I worry? Didn’t father already say, reclaiming the land must be done carefully and slowly if need be. If done well, the crops that grow from the land will be healthier and hence yield a better harvest.” At this point, Xiaohua remembered the water source issue, and asked, “But father, how can I water the crops in the future?”

Zhang Cai stopped what he was doing, and said, “To raise this up, have you thought of a solution yet?” Looking at his brothers with pleading eyes, Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Your lands are close to the river, so you can fetch water easily. The hill is so far and tall, surely you do not expect me to fetch water from the river as well?”

Zhang Cai laughed, “Xiaohua, what is behind the hill?”

Xiaohua pondered, “Isn’t there a pit behind?”

“That is right, over there is the intersection of three knolls, and we should be able to build a well at that place.”

“Seems like you have already planned ahead,” Guo Sufei smiled while praising her husband.

“In that case, father, when do we start building the well?” Zhang Xiaohua asked with some impatience.

“Once you finished evening out the land. Before winter arrives, we will take the opportunity when the ground is not frozen yet and invite some of our neighbors over to help, and then we will all build the well together.” After finishing his sentence, Zhang Cai continued to weave the basket in his hand. Hearing his father’s answer, Zhang Xiaohua’s mind finally calmed down, and the whole family continued on with the work in their hands. After a while, Zhang Xiaohua’s fatigue grew heavier and more noticeable, his eyes turned unfocused. Feeling heartbroken, Guo Sufei ordered him to bed, and Zhang Xiaohua agreed, walking woodenly towards the sleeping platform which the three brothers shared, threw himself onto the old and tattered quilt, before falling into a deep sleep, without noticing that his mother has personally applied some ointment onto his hands.

Several days were spent busily like that.

For the next few days, Zhang Xiaohua continued to be patient, and worked wholeheartedly on his land to make it smoother, without sparing a thought on the problem of the scarcity of water. On this evening, Zhang Xiaohua had finally cleared the rest of the weeds, patted the large rocks into finer soil, and was preparing to pack up and head home. Looking at the field of land that he had poured his effort into being almost ready for crop cultivation, and having only the step of loosening the soil left, Zhang Xiaohua finally lost his patience and turned around towards the back of the field where the would-be well was located.

After he turned around, he noticed that there were a few wooden planks already in place at the pit. Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly ran over to take a clearer look. Indeed, there was already a round platform at the bottom of the pit, with some wooden boards affixed in a circle and six long wooden poles inserted into the bottom. Zhang was so happy that he almost jumped, and he trotted down the slope to take an even closer look. When he reached, Zhang Xiaohua could not keep his hands to himself and started feeling out the wooden fixtures, wondering in his heart how they could help to deepen the pit. Just as he was

thinking about the problem, someone from above called out

“Xiaohua, where are you?” Hearing his second brother Xiaohu’s voice, Xiaohua hurriedly replied, “I am here, come quick second brother, we are opening the well soon.”

Zhang Xiaohu also slid down and pulled Zhang Xiaohua’s arm “Its okay, I already knew that. It was me and eldest brother who helped to transport the wooden boards over after morning. Eldest brother said that he wanted to give you a surprise, so we did not tell you in advance. Right now, our parents are waiting for you to get back, so let hurry home now.”

The two brothers then jogged home.

Dinner was already prepared at home on the dining table, and both father and eldest brother were seated around it. However, no one else was around, so Zhang Xiaohua asked “Father, where are the people who will be helping out with the well construction?” Zhang Cai laughed, “They have already gone back. We do not have much money, so I have only agreed to provide lunch for them, dinner would be self-provided. Furthermore, everyone has their own land to farm, and we can also save some money this way.” Zhang Xiaohua grunted in understanding, and went to help his mother with the rest of the dinner’s preparation.

After the meal, Zhang Cai handed out tasks to all members of the family. The three Zhang brothers naturally have to help out with the well construction directly, while Xiaohua’s mother will be in charge of preparing and delivering the meals. Zhang Cai will be buying the required materials, as well as to find more manpower. In short, everyone in the family apart from Xiaohua’s grandmother had a part to play in the construction project. Naturally, grandmother will be looking after the house during this time, and feeding the chickens itself can be considered a chore.

In the first morning hour, Zhang Xiaohua has already gotten out of bed and was rushing his other two brothers who were still sleeping on the shared platform to wake up. Zhang Xiaohua’s mother insisted that they grab a bite before leaving, saying that although their father has already left earlier, there was no point leaving earlier if there would be no one else at the well. Zhang

Xiaohua had no choice but to eat his breakfast patiently before heading towards the knoll when the sun was high up in the sky.

When they reached, there were already several people who were busy at work. Zhang Cai motioned them to come over and help dig up some of the larger rocks, and to move them aside. As such, everyone enthusiastically performed their duties.

Just as the well construction continued over the next few days, Zhang Xiaohua realized that digging a well was not a very complex project. It was the simple matter of finding a spot and using the wooden structure to go down the hole dig deeper. The only difficulty lies in finding the right spot which would not cause any ground instability, and this was something that could only be learnt through experience. The wooden structure was also necessary, otherwise, as the hole gets deeper, how would they be able to transport the earth away, and how could the people digging at the bottom of the well come back up again. Fortunately, about the position of the well, Zhang Cai was quite lucky because the expert he consulted said that a water vein was likely to be located near the would-be farm. He added that if they were successful in digging up a functional well, then the water would be as sweet as the mountain springs, and using it to water the crops would even be too wasteful for it could be used for their own consumption instead. Hearing those words, Zhang Cai snorted because it was infeasible to carry the water all the way home just to cook rice.

The days of well-digging just passed like that. Just that as the well grew deeper, the difficulty increased and the progress slowed down. This is due to several hard rocks in the deeper parts of the earth. Fortunately, there was no vast space of bedrock, otherwise, there would be no way to go around it and the well project would have to be discontinued. As more days past, perhaps Zhang Cai's lucky streak has ended, because he finally met with a large obstacle.

On this afternoon, Zhang Xiaohua was striking the earth heavily with his hoe, before realizing that he has struck onto something exceptionally hard, causing his hands to become numb. From his experience, Xiaohua automatically moved to another spot to try and dig up the rock, but "Dang~" it was obvious that he was still within the circumference of that hard rock. Zhang Xiaohua could not help but worry, and he went around to different spots to try his luck. However,

without any exception, all spots that he struck his hoe onto were part of the same rock. Tugging on the rope around his waist, he signaled to the people above to pull him up, and with a downcast face informed his father on his recent discovery. Zhang Cai and the other workers also took turns to go down, and came up soon after without much words. Everyone started to discuss seriously, while taking turns to have their lunch, to debate on whether the rock they struck was bedrock or a large piece of rock.

Soon after, everyone scattered leaving Zhang Xiaohua who was looking at the unfinished well, his heart filled with unease. If it was truly a layer of bedrock, then there would be no way to dig around it, meaning that the several days of hard effort would be for naught. Zhang Xiaohua asked Zhang Xiaolong to lower him down to the bottom of the well again, and this time, his heart was full of resolve.

Chapter 3: Bracelet

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Bracelet

By this time, the sun was hanging in the middle of the sky. However, because the well was already very deep, nothing was visible and the diggers had to use a small oil lamp to see inside the well. Under the swaying lamp light, Zhang Xiaohua's uncertain face appeared to be deep in thought. Picking up his hoe again, he started digging on another area. "Dang, dang..." the sound was persistent even after switching locations a few times. Perhaps, they have truly reached a dead end.

The thought of giving up sprouted in Zhang Xiaohua's mind, but he eventually decided to go up to clear his thoughts first. The circumference of the well could be expanded first before they truly decide to give up the project. Although it was midday, his mother has not arrived with the lunch yet, so there was no harm trying a little more. After some pondering, Zhang Xiaohua made up his mind to continue, and thus, he walked over towards an area that was waist deep from the ground to try his luck. After digging for a while, another "Bam" sound was produced. Xiaohuai was shocked, could it be another large rock? However, as he continued to strike the ground with his hoe, there was no longer that sound being produced by his successive digs. Zhang Xiaohua thought that perhaps he had hit a small stone and hence, he continued to dig while fearfully dreading the sound of striking hard earth. Unfortunately, there was no consolation after his hard efforts because on that spot, he finally reached the same piece of rock.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua stopped digging to rest for a while before picking out another location, Zhang Xiaolong's voice echoed from above, "Xiaohua, hurry and come up for a break. Mother has brought lunch over." Then, Zhang Xiaohua was pulled up by his eldest brother, who upon seeing the grimace on his face, wordlessly handed over his lunch. Seeing Xiaohua swallow his food in large bites,

he comforted his youngest brother, “It is okay, Xiaohua. If this place is unsuitable to build a well, we can always change the location. These hills are so vast, surely there is a place from which we can construct a well from.”

After eating his fill, Zhang Xiaohua’s mood improved considerably, and his face was no longer as dark. Seeing the other workers head downwards towards the well, he smiled towards Zhang Xiaolong, “I know, big brother. I will go up and look around, and will come back in a while.” Zhang Xiaolong patted Zhang Xiaohua’s back, and without saying anything else, he took the bamboo basket away.

Using his hoe as support, Zhang Xiaohua climbed up the slope back into the plot of field which he has been working on. It has finally began to form some resemblance to an actual farm field. Putting his hoe aside, and planting his butt on the ground, Zhang Xiaohua looked blankly at the plot of land, wondering if he had to transport water from the river to irrigate his crops in the future. As his eyes spread over to the hoe, he noticed that there was a clump of soil stuck onto its tip probably from previously when he was digging. Zhang Xiaohua used his feet to step on the clump but he was unable to sweep it off. He picked up the hoe and turned it around to look at the hoe head more closely, before realizing that there was something round which was stuck. Scratching his head, Zhang Xiaohua figured that it was probably the object that caused the “Bam” sound previously. No wonder the sound went away as soon as it appeared. Zhang Xiaohua picked up a tree branch to remove the round thing from the hoe tip, he tried knocking it onto a piece of rock, but it was still stuck firmly. If he were to smash the hoe onto a large piece of rock, while it might get the object off, the object might be broken as a result of the collision. Nevertheless, he could not carry such an object while digging the earth. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua made up his mind and smashed his hoe onto a rock with half his strength. Despite hearing a “Bam” sound, the object did not break, but neither did it dislodge itself from the hoe. Even when Zhang Xiaohua adjusted his strength to his fullest abilities, but the object still did not break. Fortunately, it finally fell off, and it could be seen that the object was very sturdy.

Zhang Xiaohua picked up the circular object, using his shirt to wipe off the mud for a closer inspection. He realized that it could be a bracelet; the object was

around 2 cun wide, completely black in color, dull in appearance, and made from some unknown material. Just as Zhang Xiaohua picked up the object for a closer look, he heard Zhang Xiaolong's shout from downslope, "Xiaohua, come over quickly. There is some hope now." Upon hearing so, Zhang Xiaohua was elated and he sped down the slope, without sparing any attention on the bracelet that he had just picked up. Instead, he pocketed it somewhere convenient, picked up his hoe, and thus, he did not notice the gentle sensation spreading through his body after he held the object.

When Zhang Xiaohua reached downslope, he saw Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu's delighted faces, as well as Zhang Cai's slightly bitter expression. Hearing Zhang Xiaolong's explanation, he learnt that the hard surface was not a layer of bedrock, but rather a piece of hard rock that was not too large to be excavated. As long as they enlarged the circumference of the well, it would be possible to carry the stone up. However, more manpower was also required to enlarge the well, and the time taken to complete the project will also be extended, so the project will be more expensive. At least, they would not have to restart their efforts on another location, nor must Zhang Xiaohua carry water from the village river to irrigate the land. Seeing the bright expressions on the faces of his three sons, only Zhang Cai felt some worry in his heart, as he hoped that such an obstacle to be a one-off event. If not, this well project will have to be abandoned.

The workload in the afternoon was naturally much lighter. The people digging the well re-measured the required diameter for the mouth in order to excavate the rock successfully. After finding a solution, everyone continued on their work methodologically.

After returning home at night and finishing his dinner, before he climbed onto the sleeping platform, the bracelet in his pockets never crossed Zhang Xiaohua's mind. Only after stripping off his clothes and seeing it fall off was he reminded of the earlier events. However, Xiaohua was too tired after a laborious day of work so he simply slipped it under his pillow and went into a deep slumber.

There was nothing was unordinary on that particular night, the flame in the oil lamp has perished long ago, the wind blew and shook the fence gate, and the dried grass on the yellow mud walls were blown and shaken. The only light came

from the moon in the sky, and it shone through the open window into the rooms, onto the quilts, revealing a household whose members are all in deep slumber. Throughout the quiet night, the wind blowing sounds were the only thing that broke the silence.

The only thing that set this night apart from the usual ones was Zhang Xiaohua, or more precisely, his dream! His dream was no longer about five-spiced meat, but rather, it was full of eye-dazzling light! The lights were just blinking and swirling around as though it was breathing.

Early in the morning, just as the first rays of the sun shone onto Zhang Xiaohua's face, Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes. He looked at his surroundings with uncertainty, but did not spot any shiny object around, and then realized that all the brilliant lights he thought he saw were part of his dream. Shaking his head self-deprecatingly, he tried to go back to sleep. However, he soon realized that all he could concentrate upon was the breathing sounds of his brothers, and instead of feeling sleepy, his mind was wide awake. Left with no other choice, he got out the bed and changed out of his clothes.

As Zhang Xiaohua walked onto the courtyard, he noticed his mother in the middle preparing some breakfast on the stove, so he went to the well at the side of the fence to draw water to wash up. Seeing Zhang Xiaohua walked out, Guo Sufei asked, "What is the matter, Xiaohua? After the hard day of work yesterday, you should sleep a bit more, before continuing the work later today."

As he drew the water, Zhang Xiaohua replied, "I am not sleepy anymore, mother. I am not tired, and as you can see, I have fully regained my energy, and my body is at top condition now. With one strike of the hoe, I will be able to shatter that large rock into pieces." After saying so, he put the pail down and did some movements of hoeing in the air.

Guo Sufei laughed, "Alright, Xiaohui is a good boy, Xiaohua has grown into a big man like his father and will soon be able to support the family."

Zhang Xiaohua reddened and replied, "Mom, I am already big enough. Stop praising me like that, it is embarrassing."

At that moment, Zhang Cai returned from outside carrying vegetables in his hands, and asked, "Who has already grown up? Xiaohua, why are you awake so

early? Go and sleep a little longer.” Then, he passed the vegetables to Zhang Xiaohua’s mother and said, “The vegetable garden has some weeds growing, you have to start weeding the garden if you have the time. Even though we are all busy with the well construction, we should not neglect the vegetable garden.”

As Guo Sufei took the vegetables, she replied, “We are talking about your youngest son. For being able to wake so early today, he is sure to be an energetic helper later.” Then, she continued to make breakfast for the family, and Zhang Cai went back into the house. After washing up, Zhang Xiaohua no longer had any reason to stay in the courtyard, so he went out for a walk.

Even though it was still early, winter was approaching soon. All the farmers were restless during this period, so there were already many people walking about in the village. Some of the people were chasing the ducks and geese towards the river, some were harvesting grass to feed the chickens and pigs, and others had already picked up their hoes and were preparing to toil in the fields again. Zhang Xiaohua walked along the small road in the village, feeling something different today that sets it apart from the rest, yet he was unable to put a finger onto it. He just felt energetic, as though he had limitless energy, and his whole body is bursting with vitality. However, he would not wonder too much, and simply attributed it to a good night sleep. As he walked into the house, everyone was already having their breakfast. Thus, he hurriedly ate, and then followed his father and elder brothers towards the well.

The following days were peaceful, as the well was widened and the large stone was finally extracted from the bottom of it. The well was also becoming deeper. The large stone which was extracted had an even surface and was cool to the touch, so Zhang Xiaohua asked his brothers to shift it into under the shade of a tree beside his field, so he could use it as a resting area in the summer. As for the bracelet, it was long forgotten under the pillow, except that Zhang Xiaohua’s dreams of five-spiced meat were now replaced with the shining bright lights, not that he paid any attention to it.

Another few days passed, but the well still did not produce any water, which lead Zhang Cai to feel slightly irritated. Seeing that winter was closing in, and the ground was about to freeze, even though the ground water would not freeze, there would still be increased difficulty in digging up the well. On that night, after

the family had their dinner and gathered around to do the other mundane tasks, Zhang Cai wrinkled his brows and discussed with Guo Sufei that if the water still did not appear in the well, then they would have to stop all work and wait for spring to arrive.

At this moment, Guo Sufei said, “Hubby, did you know that Mr. Wu from the neighboring village was also planning a farm field in the hills at the south?”

Zhang Cai replied, “No I do not, but I did hear that there was another well construction project going on in that area.”

Guo Sufei continued, “That project was indeed initiated by Mr. Wu, who like us, planned to use it to irrigate his field. When I went to the riverside to pluck grass for the chickens, I met Guo Quan from the household at the village entrance. Her little aunt was married to Mr. Wu’s brother, and guess what she told me?”

“What did she say? Could it be that their well already had water?” Zhang Cai inquired. “Didn’t they begin later than us? How could they have succeeded so soon?”

“Is water the only thing on your mind, this is something much more important,” Guo Sufei said exasperatedly.

“Ai, what happened then?” Not only was Zhang Cai hooked, the three Zhang brothers also grew curious.

“As they dug up the well, they discovered an old container!” Guo Sufei continued, “When the container was excavated out, and the lock broken with a hoe to reveal its contents, even though the interior were covered in mud, but it was evident that the contents were precious. We sure are unfortunate, don’t you think? Even though we began earlier than them, all we had so far was a useless piece of rock.”

Just as the family was enraptured with story of Mr. Wu striking rich, Zhang Xiaohua then remembered that he had also dug something out. Excitedly, he said, “Dad, Mom, I also dug out a treasure from our well.” Under the curious and excited eyes of his family, he took out the long forgotten bracelet from under his pillow.

Zhang Cai received the bracelet from Zhang Xiaohua and placed it under the oil lamp for a closer inspection, but all he saw was a black, dull thing made from some unknown material; it was closer to a scrap metal hook than a bracelet. Not knowing what it actually was, he handed it over to Guo Sufei, who took it over and observed it with her hands. Using her fingers to scratch on it for a while, she said, "It feels too light to be made of jade, and there are no patterns, so rather than a decorative item, it seems to be a child's toy. Here Xiaohua, you can take it back to play." Xiaohua dejectedly took back the bracelet before passed it to his two elder brothers, as though not being able to dig up any treasure was his fault.

The two brothers twirled the bracelet around their hands before returning it to Xiaohua. Seeing that nobody was interested in this artifact, Xiaohua had no choice but to put it back into his pocket.

Guo Sufei then continued, "Sigh, if this was a truly precious item, then we could consider storing it to use as your eldest brother's betrothal gift." After saying it out, the whole family's interest was sparked again. When summer arrives, Zhang Xiaolong would have reached a full twenty years, and it would be the time for him to find a young lady. One by one, the family started to describe an ideal bride for Zhang Xiaolong. When the oil lamp finally extinguished, everyone was still in the middle of conversation, but remembering that there was well-construction and farm work the next day, they went back to their platforms to sleep.

Before sleeping, just as Zhang Xiaohua was about to put the bracelet back to under his pillow, a moment of hesitation turned his mind around. "Mr. Wu has his treasure which he dug from the ground, and I too have my own. I should also cherish this treasure of mine." Having thought so, he noticed that the bracelet fit snugly on his hand. He tried waving his hand about but it still stayed on. Zhang Xiaohua felt joy in his heart; this bracelet seemed to be tailored to his size. Even after falling asleep, he did not realize that if the bracelet fitted so well on his hands, then how could he have slipped it on in the beginning? Needless to mention, his five-spiced meat dreams were now a thing of the past, only the bright lights appeared in his dreams.

Chapter 4: Act of courage

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

The New Year

For the next few days, Zhang Cai and his family continued to work on the construction of the well. Fortunately on the sixth day, the water that everyone was hoping to see finally appeared. At the last moment, they managed to build the well right before winter, which could be considered a huge accomplishment. Everyone felt relief in their hearts. While Zhang Cai was busy handing out the remuneration to the fellow workers, Zhang Xiaolong and his two brothers were busy tidying up the road from the field to the well. The gloomy winter clouds were now overcast in the sky and little bean-sized snow started to fall, signaling the start of winter.

The first snow storm began to fall, and the cold winter wind became even colder, which also meant that the new year was arriving soon.

Zhang Cai was very pleased with the accomplishments of the past year; his family now had an additional plot of land with its own well, the grains produced by this field could be stored as rations in the case of a drought. Therefore, on the upcoming New Year, he asked Guo Sufei to prepare some New Year specialties so that everyone could enjoy the upcoming celebrations to the fullest. His mother-in-law was already very old, so her living to see another year was a cause to be happy for. However, her body has also gotten worse over the past few days, and she had to lie in bed during half the day. Whether she could live through another year was still uncertain. When he thought of his parents and his recently-deceased father-in-law, Zhang Cai eyes grew even more determined to celebrate and enjoy the impending New Year.

Farmers do not celebrate the New Year very extravagantly. They would usually

prepare a few more dishes, and prepare the food in larger portions. As for the New Year specialty goods, they were simply the sundries that Zhang Cai bought from a market outside the village. He had also purchased a few foodstuffs that were not usually found at home, which the three brothers gazed at enviously hoping to sneak an early taste. Apart from settling the matters of the New Year celebration, Guo Sufei also went around the village to meet their relatives on matters relating to her eldest son's marriage. However, from the ever-changing mood on her face, it was evident that those matters were not going as smoothly as she hoped.

Time seemed to pass faster in the bustle of the Zhang household, and before long, the New Year finally arrived.

On New Year Eve, as the whole family gathered around the stove discussing about the events of the previous year as well as Zhang Xiaolong's approaching marriage, a sudden shout could be heard from outside the village. A large commotion seemed to be stirring outside. "Could the bandits have come?" A sudden worrying thought struck past Zhang Cai's head. However, this was unlikely to be the case because the households among the villages in the area were all very poor. Thus, the nearby bandit stronghold had no reason to come to a place where even the birds would not leave their droppings at. Even though Zhang Cai thought that way, he dared not let his guard down. Thus, he called his three sons to carry their hoes and any other metal objects, as they walked out of this house carefully. The fence surrounding the Zhang's courtyard was only as high as half a person's height, so they could immediately spot the current situation in the village. In the village, there were many people who have gathered into large discussion groups. There were also people who were sprinting about, but none of these people were familiar faces. Despite the fright that was visible on everyone's faces, there were also hints of excitement. Assessing the current situation, Zhang Cai called his children back into the house and ordered them to put away their "weapons", while he went out alone to fish for more news. The three brothers were naturally not willing to stay behind, so they stealthily left the house and went to gather information from the similar-age peers.

There were many people out in the village standing or sitting in small groups,

all discussing about same topic. Zhang Cai walked towards one such group who were carrying pipes, and pushed his way to the middle until he saw the familiar face of blacksmith Liu. Patting his shoulders, Zhang Cai asked, "Old Liu, what is happening? Why is there such a large commotion outside?" Blacksmith Liu quietly smoked his pipe, and on seeing that it was Zhang Cai who asked, he tapped the pipe a few times, put on a fresh patch of grass, and then inhaled deeply.

"Old brother, did you know that north of our village is the stronghold of the XiCui mountain bandits?"

Zhang Cai replied, "Of course I do, they are the largest bandit group within these hundreds of li, how could I have not heard of them? However, they would usually target the more affluent areas in the north, why would they come over to this side?"

Blacksmith Liu took another smoke on his pipe, and replied, "True, but do you remember that not long ago, Mr. Wu from the Xin village dug up a container of valuables?"

Zhang Cai felt like the light has finally dawned on him. "Could it be that..." He did not dare probe any further, as he realized the reason for the bandits' attack. Wealth should be kept hidden, otherwise, what positive outcome could arise when bandits have set their sights on your wealth?

Seeing that Zhang Cai remained silent, butcher Guo who was on the side squeezed over and mysteriously said, "Furthermore, Mr. Wu initially feigned ignorance, which piqued the fury of the bandit leader who immediately held the tens of people in the household as hostages at the shrine, before sending some of his men to overturn the house. Finally, they found a pile of treasure at the bottom of the vegetable cellar, and feeling deceived, they massacred all the hostages before burning down the shrine. Fortunately, even though Xin village is slightly larger than us, they also live in impoverished conditions, so the bandits did not continue their plundering and instead warned the rest of villagers not to report the matter to the authorities, or they would soon follow the Wu family."

Blacksmith Liu said, "Disaster disguised as a blessing indeed, a few days ago they were still thinking that they have struck rich, but now, they all perished

under a calamity. What a waste~”

Butcher Guo continued, “Not every member perished though. Mr. Wu’s younger brother’s wife went back to our village to visit her parents, and has yet to return today, so she managed to avoid the calamity. Earlier on, if not for someone spreading the news over, she would still be kept in the dark. Furthermore, the person who spread the news over also said that before the mountain bandits left, they tied a girl onto a horse, and although her face was not visible, it is most likely to be Mr. Wu’s daughter whom they brought back up into the mountain.”

The three Zhang brothers who were standing behind their father suddenly felt chill after hearing the news from the villagers. Even though they have heard of the atrocities by these bandits, but those were just hearsay. Now that a tragedy has fallen unto someone close to them, as Mr. Wu was one of the few learned people who taught Zhang Xiaohua, even though he did not see it with his own eyes, Zhang Xiaohua felt fear and grief pervade his heart. Subconsciously, he rubbed the bracelet on his arm, thinking, “Luckily the thing I dug out was not a real treasure. Even if it was so, I must definitely not tell anyone to prevent disaster befalling on me and my family.” It was how the idea of every man for himself imprinted itself onto the young boy’s heart.

The three brothers told their father that they wanted to personally go over to Xin village to scout the situation, but Zhang Chai refused their request. After all, New Year was approaching and it was inauspicious to see bloodshed or misfortune. Furthermore, the Wu family house has probably reduce to a pile of mud and debris by now, and the scene would be quite traumatic, not to mention that the authorities have probably arrived, and going over would invite interrogation from them.

As the discussion died down, the villagers eventually scattered back to their homes. No matter what happened, their personal affairs are more important than other people’s business. Sweeping the snow from their doorsteps was a superstition that even farmers follow to avoid such a calamity falling on them.

As Zhang Cai and the three brothers returned home, they saw their grandmother and Guo Sufei huddle around the stove fire. Then, they recounted the news to both of their shock. Both women then prayed to the heavens so that

the deceased could be reincarnated sooner, and that their own family would not experience such a tragedy. Even after the sky turned dark and the oil lamp in the middle of the house was lit, Zhang Xiaohua's grandmother was still crying out, "Disaster disguised as a blessing, disaster disguised as a blessing indeed."

Even though the New Year has returned, the Guo village atmosphere was not as vibrant as the previous years. Under the dark night sky, only the innocent children were carrying their lanterns and playing around, because only they could preserve their naivety in the face of human cruelty. Most of the villagers were like the Zhang household, they enjoyed a sumptuous dinner to pack away the previous year worth of weariness and to welcome for a better, more comfortable future ahead, but at the back of their heads, they could not forget the unfortunate incident of the Wu family. Thinking that in this dog eat dog world, it is difficult to avoid the mentality of putting oneself before others, and to hope for self-protection in such a bleak environment.

The New Year which should have been lively and exciting just passed quietly that way. Whether or not there was joy, sorrow, rewards or pain in the dreams of other people, Zhang Xiaohua had the same dream of the bright lights again.

The way farmers celebrate the New Year was actually pretty simple, apart from visiting each other's houses, they would also visit the distant Lu town town fair. Every New Year day, the Lu town has a street that would be bustling with people and liveliness. Everyone would be dressed in their new clothes, while bringing along a full pouch to enjoy the atmosphere of the new year festivities.

For the Zhang household, Guo Sufei had to stay at home to look after Zhang Xiaohua's grandmother, so Zhang Cai brought his three sons to the Lu town instead. Lu town was about thirty li south of Guo village.

There were not many streets in the town of Lu and there would not be as much excitement on normal days. It was not difficult to rally the people during the New Year. Everyone was more than willing to spend a year's accumulated worth of energy to squeeze among the crowds in the streets. There was a road that stretches from the north to the south, and it was slightly larger than the other streets. There were also many stores opened on both sides of the road. No matter what they were selling, business appeared to be extremely good. Apart from the stores, there were several vendors who set up their stalls outside these

stores, hawking their wares loudly and lugging customers over. On normal days, if the store owners were to see such street vendors, then they would chase these people away without hesitation. However, today was a special occasion as everyone was seeking to enjoy the liveliness, and nobody would commit an inauspicious act of spoiling the atmosphere.

Because of this, the street which was not very wide to begin with became even more crowded, and for the three brothers who were following their father, their eyes were all over the place not knowing where to start.

Chapter 5: The New Year

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Act of courage

It was not Zhang Xiaohua's first time participating in Lu town's New Year celebration. It was after all the most crowded place in several li during this period of every year, and from as far as he could remember, he had always come here during the New Year. However, the only memories he had during those years were of candy sellers, snack sellers, and nothing else. He had even cleanly forgotten about how crowded it would be, or perhaps he thought that squeezing among the crowd was another game at that time. This time, as he was standing at the north entrance of the street, looking towards the crowd and store goods and novelties and stalls, Zhang Xiaohua regretted that he had not enough eyes to enjoy the sights of his surroundings.

The family of Zhang followed the flow of the crowd as they slowly moved from the north entrance towards the middle. Every time they pass by a store, they would want to squeeze into the store. Regardless of its merchandise, no matter if it was silk, antiques, or even medicine, they wanted to stop to take a look. The three brothers did not come just to window shop, there were more people here than they could ever see in their village, and everyone was dressed to the nines, so the brothers' attention was drawn towards the especially pretty ladies. It was a pity that the three brothers had ordinary looks, and their clothes were simple, so whenever the ladies passed them, their sights would glaze over them and they not bother to spare the brothers any attention. Nevertheless, there were some ladies who could feel the particularly fiery gaze from these brothers, and would either move away immediately from shyness, or glare back at the brothers until the brothers felt embarrassed and looked away. While Zhang Xiaohua was looking mostly at the novel things which he had had ignored in the past, Zhang Xialong and Xhang Xiaohu were searching for the sake of their futures, they were

hoping to meet an agreeable young lady that day, but it was apparent that most of the ladies would not spare them any attention.

In the middle of the street was a large store with a signboard “Rich People’s Clothes” affixed to it. Upon seeing the signboard, Zhang Cai eyes brightened and he called out the three brothers to follow while entered the store. The attendant at the door immediately walked up to welcome him, “Dear guest, may I know what are you looking for?” not seeming to mind Zhang Cai’s old clothes or shabby appearance.

When Zhang Cai entered the store, he did not walk straight to the counter, but stood by the door and looked at the crowd of male and female guests bustling around. Not knowing how to proceed, he recalled himself on hearing the store attendant’s greetings, and said, “I wish to get my children some clothes, and buy some clothes for their mother too.” Just as he replied, the three brothers walked in, and as it was not often that they would enter a such store, they felt unsure of how to behave or to perform a purchase. The store attendant overlooked their apparent discomfort, and smiled, “Would these guests like to come over to see if there is anything to their liking?”

After saying so, he lead them to a counter at the corner, and presented to them the clothes on display. There were fewer people in this counter than most others, having only two groups, the first group being two young ladies deciding among some colors and the second a family of three who have already selected their purchase while another attendant helped to wrap it up. Apart from this counter, there were many bright and colorful clothes of clearly better quality displayed around the shop, with well-dressed customers standing aside pointing towards the merchandise which caught their eyes. It seemed that the store attendant had been trained well to attend to the needs of their customers; upon looking at the Zhang household he could ascertain that they were looking for durable cloths over the more fanciful materials.

Even though the attendant had brought Zhang Cai to the appropriate place, there was a look for dismay on Zhang Cai’s face because on the previous occasions, it was the children’s mother who made the decisions, but since she was home taking care of their grandmother today, Zhang Cai was at a loss on which he should pick. Seeing the look on his father’s face, Zhang Xiaohu quickly

went up and said to the attendant, "We shall look around ourselves; you can attend to other customers first."

After the store attendant left, Zhang Cai admitted, "Look at my foolishness, I did not ask your mother before we left on what are the types of cloth to buy. It seems that we will have to go home empty handed for today's trip."

Coincidentally, the taller of the two ladies who was walking past Zhang Xiaolong while carrying a navy colored cloth, overheard Zhang Cai's confession, and she walked back to her companion and signalled a look towards Zhang Xiaolong, before approaching Zhang Cai saying, "Excuse me mister, I would like to discuss a matter with you."

Feeling confused, Zhang Cai replied "What is the matter lady?"

The taller lady replied "Mister, I was planning to pick a set of clothes for my elder brother who is not here today. Since this young master is of similar build, would it be okay if he helps us try on the clothes? I just overheard you say that you were facing difficulties choosing the appropriate clothe. In return, my sister and I can assist you to pick out some appropriate choices."

Zhang Cai was overjoyed and he agreed immediately. Thus, Zhang Xiaolong ended up trying on several sets of clothes for the ladies, while Zhang Cai was also very satisfied because even the store attendant commented that the ladies had a really good eye. The only regret was that after the store attendants wrapped the ladies' purchase, the ladies left immediately so he did not have the chance to ask for their names.

Zhang Xiaolong carried the cloth looking slightly depressed as he walked behind Zhang Cai out of the shop, but as he was about to enter the store across the street which sold farming tools, the sounds of drums and gongs suddenly arose. On hearing the sounds playing, Zhang Xiaohua jumped excitedly.

"Dad, come quickly, the show is beginning so let's head over there."

Just as Zhang Xiaohua shouted, a large group of people also went and squeezed towards the sound of the gongs. Zhang Cai then hurriedly called Xiaolong and Xiaohu to follow the flow of the crowd.

Lu town has a New Year tradition of erecting a stage platform at the New Year

bazaar, with performances being held daily until the bazaar closes. To the farming households who could not enjoy such entertainment often, this was another important event in the New Year which they look forward to, so it was no wonder that Xiaohua was so excited.

The performance began just as the Zhang household reached the stage. There were three lines of the audience so it was fortunate that the stage was high enough for the people behind to watch the performance. Even though there were many people in the audience, it could not match to the number of people still bustling around in the stores.

A popular folk story was being staged, and the audience were enraptured in the performance, while Zhang Xiaolong being no exception as he gradually forgot his earlier regret.

Just as everyone was watching the performance, an argument suddenly broke out on the other side of the stage, and although it was loud, there were many people around the stage so most could not hear the specifics. However, Zhang Xiaohua could hear the argument, and he felt as though he could recognize the voice of the lady, perhaps she was one of their fellow village members? Coincidentally, there was a tree nearby, so Zhang Xiaohua climbed up to take a look at the commotion. He was able to recognize the lady in a glance; he then shouted towards Zhang Xiaolong, "Eldest brother, it is the lady who previously helped us pick the clothes. She seems to be in trouble!"

Upon hearing that, Zhang Xiaolong squeezed through the crowd immediately, even before consulting with his father, while Zhang Cai pulled Zhang Xiaohua's hands while calling Zhang Xiaohua to come down from the tree and follow him.

After squeezing through the crowd with many difficulties, Zhang Xiaolong reached the other side of the stage and the scene immediately made his blood boil.

The stage platform was supported by tall pillars, and there were two pitiable ladies huddling each other at the bottom of the pillars, their faces were red, and they were holding a small package which seemed to be the clothes that they bought earlier. Standing before them were two short and fat men holding fans and dressed in luxurious clothes, muttering something while appearing to bully

the ladies. Around the two fat men were seven to eight manservants with large sturdy bodies dressed in coarse attire, forcing the performance spectators to make way for them. Among these fiercely built manservants, some had mocking expressions on their faces as they looked on at their young masters' despicable behavior, while the rest were glaring back at the crowd as if to challenge anyone to come forward and intervene on the ladies' behalf. Even though there seemed to be people with the intention to help, they were deterred by these goons and thus could only watch from the side.

When Zhang Xiaolong rushed over and saw the current state of events, just as he was thinking of how to react, upon seeing the pleading eyes of the taller lady, even though the glance was not directed at him, he lost track of his thoughts and rushed forward. At this moment, Zhang Xiaolong was held back from behind, and when he turned around, he realized that his family has already caught up, and Zhang Cai was holding on to his wrist. Zhang Xiaolong frantically plead, "Dad..."

Zhang Cai said softly, "Xiaolong, do not be rash. The few of us are no match for these people."

Zhang Xiaolong replied, "But if we do not help them, these two ladies are going to be bullied."

Zhang Xiaohua also quipped, "That is right, dad, those two ladies even helped us earlier."

Zhang Cai then said, "It is right to help others in need, but we should also know when to step back if we are unable to alleviate the situation, and instead land ourselves in trouble. Look at the man in black who is carrying such a large blade."

The three Zhang brothers looked over at the direction where their father pointed out, and there was indeed a muscular manservant in black, his hands crossed over his chest while holding a large blade, leaning against a tree and squinting his eyes as though he was sleeping. He appeared to be the two bullies' bodyguard.

It also seemed that he was the main deterring factor for why most spectators are unwilling to intervene.

However, with no solution at hand, Zhang Xiaolong began to turn frantic.

Just as Zhang Xiaolong was hesitating, the scuffle at the tall pillars became even more severe, as the two short and fat young masters had managed to pry the two ladies away from each other, and were about to drag the ladies to a corner ally. Zhang Xiaolong could no longer contain his worries as he shrugged off Zhang Cai's hands with great strength. Those rotten goons had already thought that they have scared off the bystanders and were already anticipating a "good show" to watch, thus, they did not expect anyone to rush out so suddenly. When Zhang Xiaolong reached the sides of the two village girls, he pulled them by their arms towards him, breaking off the grip of the two short and fat young masters whose strength could not compare, and shouted,

"What do you think you are doing?"

Seeing their prey escaped from their hands, their faces turn red with rage as they glanced towards each other, before the young master in orange said, "We are not doing anything. Who are you, and what do you want?"

Zhang Xiaolong froze for a moment, and then said, "I am their cousin. Why are you pulling them? Aren't you afraid if I report this to the authorities?"

The young master in black laughed, "Report to the authorities? Sure, let us go together. In Lu town, this young master represents the authorities. Your cousin just stepped on my shoes, so I wanted her to compensate me, I just want to see on which side the authorities are going to stand by."

At this moment, Zhang Cai and the rest managed to rush over. Zhang Cai immediately bowed towards the two men, and smiled obligingly, "Dear young masters, please be appeased. These two girls of mine are still insensible. Look at your shoes, we will pay for them. Since today is such an important day for celebration, please be magnanimous and spare us. A good deed will always be repaid in kind."

The young master in orange laughed, "Well said, it seems that this old fogey knows what to do. I will stave off my hands, so you can just compensate me for this pair of shoes."

Zhang Cai felt wary in his heart, and asked carefully, "Would this young master kindly tell me how much should I compensate?"

The young master in orange raised his arm and extended his palm. Zhang Cai

then sighed in relief, “I see, so it is five coins. I will pay them right now.” Zheng Cai then took out five copper coins from his breast, but the man in orange did not bother to look at the coins and slapped them onto the floor, berating, “You old country fogey, do you think that my shoes are the same as your straw slippers and are worth only five copper coins. Listen carefully, I want five pieces of silvers!”

Zhang Cai’s heart flipped, and immediately smiled apologetically, “Young master, you must be joking, my household annual expenses are even less than three silvers, how could these shoes cost that much?”

The young master in black replied, “You old fogey, are you suspecting our sincere honest words?”

At that moment, the two village girls behind Zheng Xiaolong regained their courage and stuck their heads out from behind Zhang Xiaolong’s back, “Dear Uncle, we have been maligned. We did not step on their shoes, we just arrived to watch the performance, but before we could do so, these men surrounded us for no reason.”

Zhang Xiaolong also said angrily, “Father, these men are obviously out to coerce us. I think it is better to bring these ladies to the authorities to protect them.”

The young master in black laughed heartily, “You country bumpkins have not recognized enough of the world. You do not even recognize this great uncle Zhao in front of you, or else why would you mention about some little authority. Men, come over and teach them who the authorities are.”

With a wave of this Zhao young master hand, the manservants who were originally looking from aside started to walk over while rubbing their fists menacingly. Seeing that situation had turned sour, Zhang Cai said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Bring these two ladies to escape. The three of us will stay here to stall them.” After finishing his words, he led Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu to face against these manservants, while Zhang Xiaohua also pulled the two ladies and head towards the crowd.

Despite being famers who do manual labor every day and are able to face off these manservants on-on-one, Zhang Cai, Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu

were currently outnumbered, and after a few rounds of struggling, they were thrown onto the floor and subjected to a flurry of kicks and punches. Zhang Xiaohua saw his father and brothers got hurt in front of his eyes, and just as they were to run off into the crowd, they were unexpectedly blocked by the bodyguard until the other manservants caught up. Finally, Zhang Xiaohua and the two village girls were captured and brought back to the young masters. Seeing his father and brothers being hit relentless as they scrambled on the floor, Zhang Xiaohua tried to rush towards them but was kneed in the chest and fell onto the ground, his body covered in mud. When he tried to get back up, two of the manservants came over and pressed him onto the pillar, mercilessly slapping him until fresh blood dribbled from the edges of his mouth. Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua was still young, they stopped their assault and only pressed onto his body to immobilize him.

No matter how much Zhang Xiaohua struggled, he could not free himself from the arms of the two burly manservants, and his tears started falling as he watched his father and brothers continued to be assaulted helplessly.

Chapter 6: Savior

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Savior

TN: Jianghu – the world of martial arts experts.

As Zhang Xiaohua's tears fell onto the dusty ground, his thirteen year old innocence was baptized by the roughness and inequality of the world. Seeing the spectators who were standing idly by the side, he realized that there was no one to hold against but himself and his lack of power. He grasped onto the knowledge that power brings hope, as he desperately wished for that power to protect his family from scoundrels and from the blows that felt like hoes striking the earth. A seed was planted in his heart, and although he was still immature, his heart was no longer weak like before but steadfast and more determined.

The two village girls cried as they tried to shake off from the manservants, but in the end, they were still pulled back to the two young masters' sides. The number of spectators has also increased, but no one dared to make a sound; the atmosphere was completely quiet apart from the sounds of the three men being hit, the ladies' cries, and the young masters' laughter. The sun in the sky also began to descend.

At this moment, a melodious female voice sounded from one top of the pillar where Zhang Xiaohua's body was pinned against, "A pack of evil dogs. Senior, if you are still not taking any action, then these people are going to be bitten severely by these crazy dogs."

A male voice followed, "Junior sister is so kindhearted as always. I will be going down then to beat up some dogs."

As the voice finished speaking, a shadow descended from the tall pillar and landed lightly behind the malicious goons. By somehow, the man used both his hands and caught two of the manservants, and threw them casually onto the

floor. Then, he flew up by kicking both legs, and with a “pa pa pa pa” sound, another group of manservants were kicked onto the ground, their bodies remained motionless as it was uncertain if they were still alive. The three Zhang men were finally freed; their bodies could be seen curled on the ground with fresh blood and mud on their faces as they groaned in pain.

Only then could everyone see clearly that the man who descended from the pillar was a twenty year old youth, whose appearance was as refined as a scholar, his robes pure white, and a precious sword held in his hands. As the scholar swept across Zhang Xiaohua, the two manservants who were pinning him to the wall immediately stepped back into a corner, letting Zhang Xiaohua run towards his father and brothers, tearfully helping them sit up while examining their injuries. The two young masters who were teasing the village girls finally stopped, and when the two girls ran over to check Zhang Xiaolong’s injuries, they did not dare to obstruct them.

The bodyguard in black walked up to the front and stared the scholar from head to toe, sizing him up before cupping his fists in a polite greeting, “May I know which sect is fellow brother from? Fierce tiger sect’s Zhao Quansheng humbly greets and request for your name.”

However, the scholar simply ignored him, and instead, he looked up towards the tall pillar. At that moment, everyone realized that there was a lady in purple standing gracefully on the pillar. Her body was tall and shapely as the wind blew against her robes, but her face was covered by a veil so no one could discern her facial appearance. Nevertheless, she could still emit an intimidating, unapproachable aura. The lady in purple jumped and landed softly in front of the scholar in white, standing side by side without any deference, and her melodious voice sounded again,

“Fierce tiger sect, such a mighty name, is it used to bully commoners? What has Shitu been doing?”

When Zhao Quansheng from the Fierce tiger sect heard her biting remarks, his faced turned ugly and his grip on the blade tightened, but upon hearing the second line, his grip loosened as he saluted the lady politely, “This person here is a disciple of the Black tiger hall, our hallmaster instructed me to protect the young master of Lu town. Since this lady here is acquainted with our hallmaster,

please forgive me if you were offended by any of my actions.”

“Acquainted with your hallmaster? Hehe, you sure know to follow where the wind blows. We have already observed your actions, and even though you did not step out of your boundaries to bully the commoners, but you have abetted the two young bullies behind you to coerce the people and tease the women. My eyes are already offended. If I do not give these two bullies a deserving punishment, who knows how much longer it will be before a life is lost under their tyranny?” The scholar in white smiled as he spoke.

Hearing his words, Zhao Quansheng wrinkled his brows and raised his voice righteously, “Even though the two of you are acquainted with my hallmaster, if you choose not to reveal your identity and continue to disrupt my mission, do not blame me for following my instructions.”

Hearing his words, the lady could not help but let out a laugh, “A dog like you still dares to be sly. I guess that you will not be satisfied until I show you my prowess.” She took a step forward as soon as she finished her sentence.

The scholar in white immediately stopped her, and said in a low voice, “Junior sister, today is the New Year, and we are here only to enjoy the festivities. Do not make any moves; it is inauspicious if blood is shed during this time of the year. Furthermore, our mission...”

“But look at these two detestable dogheads, and the pitiable plight of those courageous men who stood up against them. After being beaten so severely, if we still do not collect justice for them, I would not be able to remain calm.” The lady in purple’s voice was as cold as steel.

After a moment of consideration, the scholar in white continued, “Junior sister, you know that there are many injustice in this world. Today, we may have taught these evildoers a lesson, and helped these village people, but we cannot stay here for long. Who knows that as soon as we leave, these evildoers will look for revenge on these villagers? Instead of helping these people, will we not be inviting more trouble to them?”

The lady in purple toughened the look in her almond shaped eyes, “I do not believe that these insignificant town bullies will have any influence. If not, I shall just inform my uncle to station some troops here!”

As her voice was quite loud, the bodyguard who overheard her immediately felt unease in his heart. He knew that these words were not said merely to threaten him, and if he did not handle this matter properly, something bad was going to befall on him. Thus, he took a step forward again, and said in a warm voice, "These two young heroes, today's matter was indeed this Zhao person's fault, I ask for your forgiveness again. I will monitor and persuade these two young masters to not seek revenge, so I hope the two of you can share the name of your sect, and we can bury the hatchet. After all we are fellow martial brothers in Jianghu."

The lady in purple was already reflecting on her senior's words, and after hearing Zhao Quansheng's gentle words, without even bothering to look at the latter, she walked over to Zhang Cai's side to study at his injuries. The scholar in white took out a plaque from his breast and passed it to Zhao Quansheng. Zhao Quansheng looked at it carefully upon receiving the plaque, and a jolt of electricity through his body. With an even more respectful demeanor, he returned the plaque to the scholar with both hands, before turning around and whispering into the two young masters' ears. The two young masters' faces turned a ghostly pale and even uglier after hearing what their bodyguard's words. They hesitantly walked over to the scholar and bowed in apology. The scholar in white shook his head and smile, signaling them towards the lady in purple, so the two young masters had no choice but to walk again to the lady and apologize profusely. However, the lady in purple did not acknowledge them, and she obviously had no intention of relenting anytime soon.

The two short fat men were not stupid, and seeing that there was no possibility of receiving forgiveness, they turned towards the Zhang Cai and his family and the two village girls to beg for mercy. The farm people do not have experience in the interactions in the town, and after hearing a few sentences, their expressions eased up. Only Zhang Xiaohua had a wooden face and remained wordless. Seeing Zhang Cai's acknowledgement, one of the village girl said towards the lady in purple "Young Miss, look..." The lady in purple interrupted "You do not have to bother about my current mood, and I will listen to whatever you say. As for these two fatties, they can be pardoned from a death sentence but I will not let them go unpunished. Get them to fork out two hundred silvers for your injuries. And you two dogheads, if you ever look for

these people to settle the score, and if I get any wind of such a matter, then consider your lives forfeited.” On hearing her words, the two fat young masters were overjoyed, and agreed immediately, promising to not follow up on this matter. Then, they took out several checks from their breast, and without even counting the amount, stuffed them into Zhang Cai’s hands. Then, they meekly waited for the lady in purple’s permission to say, “Piss off” before they hurriedly left with their bodyguard.

Seeing that his junior had allowed the two young masters to return, the scholar in white walked around and gave the goons on the floor another kick without saying anything else. As these manservants picked themselves up, they silently rushed back to their young masters’ side. Seeing that the matter was settled, Zhao Quansheng did not dare to speak another word, and he both firsts cupped towards the two youths again before leading the group away.

After the group left, some of the spectators started to edge forward, but with a single glance from the scholar in white, they all halted in their steps and did not approach any closer. The scholar in white then walked over to Zhang Cai’s side and asked “Can you guys still walk?”

Zhang Cai replied “Yes benefactor, we can.”

The scholar in white continued, “Then it is best that we leave this place first. Keep the checks in your hands properly, and we will continue to talk outside the town.” Saying which, he and the lady in purple went ahead, leaving behind Zhang family and the village girls to support each other as they walked out of the town.

Zhang Cai and his group made an unusual sight, which drew the curiosity of several passerby. A couple dressed in elegant clothes, with the lady’s face covered with a veil, followed by a group of people who obviously came from the village, of which three had multiple bruises under their tattered clothes and some fresh blood on their faces, as well as a youth whose injuries were not as severe but his face swollen due to an obvious injury. Even though everyone was staring at their backs, but upon seeing the swords in the hands of the youths, they did not dare to obstruct or interrupt the group. Nobody also dared to follow this eccentric group.

On the east of Lu town was a small stream, where Zhang Cai and his group stopped at to rest. The couple walked over to the shade of a tree beside the stream, while Zhang Cai and the rest went to the stream to wash the blood and grime off their faces and bodies. Fortunately, the manservants did not go too far during the earlier scuffle. Even though their strikes were heavy, Zhang Cai and the rest did not incur any injury that was too severe; only Zhang Xialong had his arm stepped on several times which could probably lead to a fracture, but it was still uncertain whether any of them had sustained internal injuries.

After the Zhang family cleaned themselves up, they brought the two village girls to the shade of the same tree. Zhang Cai then greeted, "Benefactor, I have not asked for your name yet. You have saved the lives of our family so please accept a bow from us." Saying which, he immediately lowered his head but the scholar in white hurriedly held on to Zhang Cai's wrist and said, "I am too embarrassed. Please do not call us your benefactors. My name is Wen Wenhai, and your heroic behavior moved me to step in to help. Let us first look at your injuries."

Then, Wen Wenhai checked the pulse of Zhang Cai and the other injured members wordlessly.

Chapter 7: Returning home

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Returning home

After Wen Wenhai checked the pulse of everyone, he smiled and said, “There are no serious injuries among everyone here. There may be some internal congestion for the next few days, and the external injuries are quite severe. I have some common medicine here which is most suitable for treating such wounds; you can apply it after you reached home, and remember to take sufficient rest after that.” He then took out a small bottle and passed it to Zhang Cai. “With regards to the fractures, I am unable to do anything about them. Here is some money, it should be enough for you to go see a doctor.” Again, he produced a bunch of coins from his breast, but this time, Zhang Cai wave his hands away immediately, saying, “I cannot accept this money.”

The black-eyed Zhang Xiaohu quipped, “Just take it dad, this is a little token of sincerity from our benefactor, and the amount of money does not mean anything to him anyway, so we should just accept it gratefully.”

Zhang Cai turned his head towards Zhang Xiaohu and scolded, “We just took money from those people, how can we accept any more from our benefactor?” He then took out the checks that he received earlier from the bullies earlier, and was shocked to see that each check was worth ten silvers, and there were a total of fifty-four such checks, probably because the two fat short men were so worried that they just gave everything they had to them.

At this moment, Wen Wenhai placed the silvers that he took out onto Zhang Xiaohu’s palms and said, “This lad sure has a straightforward personality just like me. Here, take this, that money was compensation from someone else, and this money is from me.”

Seeing that Zhang Xiaohu has received the silvers, he did not blame his son any further and instead told Wen Wenhai about the excess compensation which he dared not carry. Furthermore, money was not the main problem. Rather, he was afraid that the people from before would come back to get the excess from them. Seeing the large sum of money, Wen Wenhai smiled bitterly. He initially thought that several tens of silvers will be sufficient compensation, but due to his junior sister's intervention, they may have brought some trouble to this family in the future. Not daring to make a decision by himself, he walked over to his junior sister to discuss the matter.

Zhang Xiaohua accompanied his eldest brother, but his heart was not the least bit settled, and his face was still numb and hurt. Being bullied and look down on had given him some emotional scars. He would never have expected Wen Wenhai to appear from the sky, so he stared at the sword in Wen Wenhai's hands, while the seed of desire for more power was planted in his heart.

The two village girls were standing behind Zhang Cai, not knowing how to express their gratitude. Even though they wanted to express their thanks to the lady in purple, they could feel her unapproachable aura, and thus would only look at her from afar.

The discussion between Wen Wenhai and his junior sister ended quickly, his junior sister causally took out a small plaque from her bosom but Wen Wenhai refused to take it, saying a few more sentences but seemingly unable to convince her. Left with no other choice, he accepted the plaque and walked towards Zhang Cai saying, "Uncle, it is better if you keep the money for yourself. Even if we took it away with us, if they ever come back to demand the rest of the money you would have no way to return it to them. This is a token from our sect which my junior sister has gifted to you, if they ever come back to ask for any silvers from you, you should just return the excess to them. However, if they have any ideas, then you can bring this token to the Lotus Escort gathering point in town and find their manager, saying that the owner of this plaque asked you to find him if you ever face any problem resulting from this matter."

Saying which, he took the plaque from his hands and gave it to Zhang Cai, who carefully accepted and examined it. It was about three cun* large, was black and heavy, and made from some unknown material. On the surface was some

engraving but Zhang Cai was illiterate. Beside the words were several patterns adorned, and behind the plaque was a word that Zhang Cai could recognize “Azure”, and he thought that it should be Wen Wenhai junior sister’s mark. Zhang Cai then carefully kept the plaque in his breast.

Wen Wenhai advised Zhang Cai to take good care of the plaque, and cupped his fists, “Everyone, we still have urgent matters to attend to, so we will not be sending you back to your village. If you have the chance to visit Pingyang city then please feel free to find me. We shall be on our way then.” Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned around and followed the lady in purple as they departed. Seeing their disappearing silhouette, it seemed that they were moving very fast, and before long, they completely vanished from their sights.

Since their encounter in Lu town up to the end of their meeting, the lady in purple had yet to remove her veil nor introduce herself. Thus, Zhang Cai did not even know her surname or her appearance, and could only recognize her melodious voice.

When the two youths were far away, Zhang Cai and the group then regained their senses, and Zhang Xiaohua muttered, “How could these people move so fast.”

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “Don’t you understand, this is the supposed qinggong**.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Have you seen it before?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “No, but I could guess. You do not see them running, but they were moving faster than the normal running speed. They also had a sword in their hands, so that must have been qinggong.” Zhang Xiaohua blinked his eyes and did not ask any further.

The two village girls walked over before bidding Zhang Cai goodbye. “We like to express our sincere gratitude to uncle. If you had not arrive in time, we...” as the two girls spoke, their eyes began to water and shift uncomfortably. Zhang Cai waved his hands and said, “It is nothing, we are all village people here, and we should be helping each other out. Do not talk about those unnecessary things, we have to leave soon. If not, some people are going to pass by. Which village are you two from?”

The taller of the two said, “We live in Bali Gou. My name is Liu Qing, and my cousin is Liu Yueyue.”

Zhang Cai pondered, “Bali Gou is at the west of Lu town, you will have to return to the town but now would not be a good time to go back. If you were to circle the town from its perimeters, the sky would be dark, and you may not even reach home after the sun has fully set. We live in Guo village, which is north of Lu town. Why don’t you come over to our abode to rest for a night, and I will bring you back home tomorrow?”

Liu Qing looked up at the sky, and said, “We will be bothering uncle then.”

Everyone eventually got up and dragged their injured and battered bodies back home.

Thirty li was not a short distance, not to mention that they were all injured. Furthermore, they had to circumvent around the city from its east side, so by the time they returned to Guo village, the sky was already pitch dark. Zhang Cai originally wanted to cross the bamboo forest to enter the village to avoid attention, but looking at the sky, he thought that it was no longer necessary.

Night time in Guo village was no different from the past. There are few people on the roads, and the occasional passerby would not pay much attention to them. Until they finally reached their home and saw the children’s mother waiting under the lamp, Zhang Cai was constantly in fear of being seen and questioned by his fellow villagers.”

When everyone finally crossed the fence and went into the house, Guo Sufei was horrified and she immediately grasped Zhang Cai hands to support him. She then asked, “What on earth has happened to our family?”

After she supported Zhang Cai to the chair, she immediately switched to attend to her sons, “Children, are you alright?”

Finally, she turned her attention to the two unfamiliar ladies, but did not dare to ask any questions. Instead, she turned a suspicious eye towards her husband. Zhang Cai smiled bitterly, “The children’s mother, it was no big deal. It was a long story but for now, this is Liu Qing and that is Liu Yueyue from Bali Gou. Why don’t you follow Xiaohua and take Xialong to Old Chen for a checkup, and we can continue the story later. Oh right, first take them to wash their faces, and later

you can say that their injuries were from falling off a tree.”

Guo Sufei was suspicious, but she quickly prepared some hot water to let her two sons wash up, and as she was about to draw more water for her husband, she was stopped by him who persuaded her to first take care of their sons’ injuries. Liu Qing wanted to help, but was stopped from doing so.”

Old Chen was Guo village old animal doctor who has lived in Guo village his entire life. His medical skills were not bad, not only did he treat livestock, but also treated many people with headache and fever who would come to him for a remedy. At this moment, Old Chen was idling in his own little hut, enjoying a kettle of hot wine that his children’s mother prepared, when he heard urgent knockings on his door, as though someone in the village has fallen sick again. Having no other choice, he put down his wine cup, and walked over to the door to welcome his guests. Seeing that it was Guo Sufei and her two sons, he smiled asking, “Little sister, why have you come to visit late in the night? Has the youngest one eaten something wrong?”

Guo Sufei carefully supported Zhang Xialong through the door, and said with embarrassment, “The children’s uncle brought them up to the hills to play, and they accidentally fell from the tree. His arm is now fractured, which is why I came over to disturb your rest.”

Hearing that Zhang Xialong has fractured his arm, his face turned straight and he said sharply, “If such a serious accident happened, then no matter how late it is I will still have to get up. Come in quickly!” Then, he took them to a clean room which was reserved primarily for treating patients. At this moment, Chen’s wife also came over, and Old Chen instructed her to light up the oil lamp before asking Xiaolong to remove his shirt to examine the affected arm. Using his hands to press on certain areas, he asked Zhang Xialong if he felt pain in those areas, and then sighed in relief. “It is okay, little sister. It is just a fracture, those horses and bulls have had more severe injuries before and I still managed to treat them. You can count on me for Xiaolong’s injuries.”

Old Chen’s wife was still unsettled and asked, “Old man, you just had some wine. Are you sure it is okay?”

Old Chen thumped on his chest and said, “I have been treating patients for half

my life, what does this count as? Furthermore, I have not started drinking yet, you can check the wine kettle if you do not believe me.”

Actually, Guo Sufei already smelled the odor of alcohol on Old Chen, but because there was only one doctor in the village, she could only rely on him. Hearing that he has not drunk much yet, she heaved a sigh in relief. Old Chen took out some wooden sticks that have been rubbed smooth, and a jar from the cupboard and opened its seal which caused a thick medicinal scent to waft about. Old Chen used his hands to straighten Zhang Xiaolong’s bones, and then dug out some of the medicine to apply on his arm, before using a white cloth to tie it to the stick. The whole process was so painful that Xiaolong kept sweating while his mother tenderly wiped his sweat away.

After finishing the treatment, Old Chen washed his hands and said to Guo Sufei, “Little sister, take your son home to rest. In half a month’s time, bring him back so that I can reapply the medicine, and during these hundred days for the fracture to heal, do not allow him to do any heavy farmwork.”

Guo Sufei was extremely grateful, and she left a few copper coins before bringing her two sons back home.

*TN: cun-3.33 centimeter

**TN: qinggong-literally “light martial technique”, makes the body lighter, faster, jump higher, fly around...

Chapter 8: Aftermath

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Aftermath

In the house, Zhang Cai and the other people had already cleared the mess, and everyone was sitting on the chairs waiting for their return, the bedridden mother-in-law included. Guo Sufei hurriedly told Zhang Xiaolong to tell his grandmother that he was fine, before the old lady could be willing to go back and rest.

On seeing Zhang Xiaolong's arm wrapped in the bandage, Zhang Cai knew that there was no serious injury and he finally felt at ease. Only then did he realize that his body was hurting everywhere, and he was tired to the point of death. Hence, he asked Guo Sufei arrange an area for the two ladies. This indeed posed a problem to Guo Sufei, because the house was simply not large enough. Seeing Guo Sufei's troubled face, Liu Qing said, "Auntie, we are comfortable anywhere, there is no need to arrange a place specially for us. Please do not trouble yourself." Thinking for a while, Guo Sufei offered her bed to the two ladies, while she chased Zhang Cai away to sleep with their sons. Zhang Xiaohua thus had to sleep with his grandmother, and fortunately, everybody had a place to sleep in the end.

Leaving the two ladies go into the room to sleep, Zhang Cai took out the medicine that Wen Wenhua gave him and passed it to the three brothers to eat, before letting his three sons go to sleep.

After the children have gone to bed, Guo Sufei pulled Zhang Cai out for an account of what happened in the town. When Zhang Cai finally blurt out the truth, Guo Sufei was so frightened that her face lost its color. Her body was trembling, and she cried softly, "The children's father, I almost could not see you all again. How could something like this happen during such a joyous occasion?"

Zhang Cai cajoled her and said, "It is okay now, children's mother. Isn't it all over? You should quickly keep this plaque and the money in a secure place. Tomorrow, while sending those ladies back, we will split half of the money with them." Guo Sufei said, "There is so much silvers, we have never seen that much money in our entire lives. Wouldn't it be better to return them to their owners?"

Zhang Cai said with a straight face, "We do not know who they are. Furthermore, our benefactor said that if we try to return the money, they may ask for our lives instead. Our farmers' lives are not worth much, so if they do come to collect the money, we can just return it to them." Guo Sufei nodded in agreement.

After the two finished their discussion, Zhang Cai then took out the medicine in his breast to eat, while allowing Guo Sufei to help him apply the ointments on his external wounds, before he went back to sleep at Zhang Xiaohua's usual spot. Only after ensuring that her husband and sons are asleep did she return to her room.

The two ladies in her room had experienced a day's worth of fright and could fall asleep immediately. Thus, they did not notice when Guo Sufei entered the room. Seeing their sleeping faces, Guo Sufei smiled thoughtfully to herself.

During the afternoon of the same day, after Wen Wenhai and his junior sister left, they continuously used their qinggong and covered quite a large distance. "Junior sister, we are about to reach the main road, and can no longer use qinggong. Now that we have saved those people in the afternoon and left our horses in Lu town, what should we do for the remainder of our journey?"

His junior sister said in a soft voice, "However senior brother wants." Even though her voice was melodious, it was also cold and detached.

Wen Wenhai smiled bitterly and rubbed his nose, "Junior sister, seeing that you are usually unconcerned about other people's affairs, and are uninterested in outside affairs, why did you push me in the afternoon to help those people. Furthermore, you left your token behind, what if that farmer used it to commit crimes, what can we do then? You would not be able to face our master."

His junior sister replied, "Many thanks to senior brother's intervention this afternoon. As for my token, I will explain it to our master when we return, and I

believe that he will understand my actions.”

Wen Wenhai said, “Fine then, we shall go back and explain to our master together. For the incident this afternoon, I should have lent a helping hand anyway. Standing up for the weak is our duty, and if not for our mission, I would have taken action earlier and not let Zhang Cai and his family get hurt.”

The junior sister smiled, “I knew that senior brother is a kind-hearted person who would not stand by idly.”

Wen Wenhua replied, “You little rascal, since young, you would have a cold exterior but a warm heart. We grew up together; do you think I would have not known your intentions? However, it is no longer early, and according to the waiter in the restaurant yesterday, we are still pretty far from our destination. Hence, we should avoid any further delay, and find some horses to continue on our trip.”

The junior sister replied with same line, “However senior brother wants.”

Wen Wenhua pondered for a while, and said, “Junior sister would attract more attention since you are wearing a veil. Wait here while I go up to the stables to find a horse.” Without waiting for a reply, he left not letting her have the last line of, “However senior brother wants.”

After an incense stick worth of time, the sounds of a horse gallop could be heard. The junior sister raised her head, and indeed, it was Wen Wenhai who arrived with the horses. He threw the reins over to his junior sister who caught it mid-air and landed on the stirrups, before shooting ahead like an arrow. Wen Wenhao shook his head and smiled, before flicking his rein urging his horse to catch up.

Zhao Quansheng from the fierce tiger sect brought two short fat men, as well as a group of manservants, back in a dejected mood. On the way, more than a few passers-by would hide when they saw them from afar, but some noted that they were not as arrogant as usual. These two men were the sons of Lu town wealthy merchant, and also the biggest bullies around. Today, their houses were hosting important guests, which was why these two men could sneak out and roam about. The banquet has ended by then, leaving behind the Fierce Tiger Chief as well as the wealthy merchant, who saw these two left in high spirits but

return in low spirits and felt suspicious, thus asking them to come over to ask further. Seeing the two short fat men remaining silent and not daring to speak up, Zhao Quansheng took the initiative and reported the events which recently happened. When Zhao Quansheng mentioned the two men teasing the two village girls, the wealthy merchant glared at the two fatties but remained silent, until he heard about the few village farmers going over to protest, he wrinkled his brow and asked, “Where did these mudbags come from, daring to make a scene?”

Zhoa Quansheng did not answer him, but continued his story, until he mentioned the Jianghu couple, the wealthy merchant’s face changed and the fat on his face tightened, while looking towards the Fierce Tiger Chief who happened to be his relative, which also explains why their relationship is so close. The chief remained silent, but picked up his tea cup for another sip. However, after Zhao Quansheng finished his story, including the part where the scholar in white took out a plaque, his hands froze and he asked, “What was written on it?”

Zhao Quansheng replied with a frightened expression, “Piaomiao!”

“Dang~” the teacup fell from the sect head hands and shattered on the floor. The wealthy merchant did not pay much attention to the cup, but he asked urgently, “Third brother Zhao, what is Piaomiao?”

Third brother Zhao did not answer him immediately, but stood up and walked towards the two short fat men, raised his hands and “Piak” slapped them several times until their faces swell and blood dribbled from the corner of their mouths. The two men were too frightened to even move away, and only begged their “Third uncle” for forgiveness. Zhao third brother’s anger was through the roof, “You two losers, can’t you cut your bad habits? Your father already prepared four rooms with female attendants, are you still unsatisfied with that? Was the village girl that pretty?”

The two men did not dare to let out a word, so he persisted, “So, was she pretty?”

The two men said, “Not very pretty, but they looked demure which made hands itchy~”

Zhao third brother laughed angrily, “Not pretty yet you still want to tease, and your hands even got itchy. I should really cut your hands off, do you know how much of a trouble you two have stirred up?”

At this point, the wealthy merchant realized that the matter was serious, so he got up and asked urgently, “Third brother, is it a very big deal?”

Third brother Zhao did not answer him immediately again, but he narrowed his eyes and pondered for a moment, before asking with curiosity, “Then how did the two of you come back unharmed?” The question was unexpected, and the two short fat men were at a loss for words.

Zhao Quansheng continued to speak on their behalf, saying “Hallmaster, it was like so.” Then, he continued his tale up to the very end leaving no details out. Third brother Zhao went back to sit on his chair, closing his eyes and thought to himself silently. One of the fat men who just got beaten whispered, “Even though it should have been only two hundred silvers, I did not count before handing the money over, and ended up giving away the whole amount of five hundred silvers. Since I have nothing on tomorrow, I shall get some men to find out where those mudbags came from, and force them to return the excess silvers to me.”

At this moment, third brother Zhao opened his eyes and slapped the table in fury, shouting, “Imbecile, you dare to do so! In the future, don’t even think about getting the money back, those were money to buy your lives.”

The wealthy merchant moved over and asked, “Third brother, why are you acting like this, confusing me even further. Five hundred silvers is not a large sum, but shouldn’t you tell me the reason?”

Third brother Zhao laughed bitterly, “Big brother, have you heard of Wujian sect?”

The wealthy merchant was confused as he replied, “Of course, isn’t that your sect’s important backer? Of course I would have heard of them.”

Third brother Zhao continued, “Then you should know about Lotus Escort right.”

The wealthy merchant nodded in affirmation.

“If you compare the Lotus Escort with Wujian Sect, which would be more powerful?” Third brother Zhao asked.

The wealthy merchant smiled, “Both are equal in power, neither is above the other.”

Third brother Zhao smiled bitterly in response, “Big brother is too kind with his words. Wujian sect is one chip below Lotus Escort, everyone in Jianghu knows this for a fact. You do not have to give us too much credit.”

“However, what does this Lotus Escort have to do with Piaomiao?” The wealthy merchant asked curiously.

“Lotus Escort is merely an outer branch of the Piaomiao sect!” Third brother Zhao’s words were like a large baton striking on the hearts of everyone who was listening; the two short fat men were frightened to a daze. Never could they imagine themselves stepping on the shoes of such a mammoth when they went ahead to tease those two village girls. If not for Zhao Quansheng’s quick wits which ended in them compensating the victims, they did not dare to imagine the consequences of invoking the fury of such a giant.

Chapter 9: Mountain peak

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Mountain peak

The wealthy merchant was at a loss for words. He had heard of the Lotus Escort, but was unaware of the extent of power they possessed. This matter made him realize clearly that if the Lotus Escort wished to eradicate his family, then it would be as simple as flipping over a palm for them. Thinking back to the events which were recounted, his mind was in a state of confusion.

At this moment, third brother Zhao said, "Big brother, there is no need to despair. Since those two good-for-nothings have already returned safely, and even compensated the victims, this matter will not be raised to the attention of the Piaomiao sect. After all it is not a very big matter. However, big brother, you must remember to never look for trouble from these people, or if anyone from Piaomiao catches a wind of your actions..."

Those words were like holy words which drummed the ears of the wealthy merchant, and carved into his heart. He replied, "I understand, third brother, I only can't wait to send them five thousand silvers right now. Men, get these two young masters back into the rooms and watch them closely. Do not permit them to leave the house in these three months."

"No, do not ground them immediately," Third brother Zhao interrupted the wealth merchant's order. "Do not allow them to apply any ointment, just keep their faces swollen like this, and it would be even better to spank them a few more times with a wooden pad so they will not be able to walk normally. Then, let them go to the wine house that they frequent, and send men to spread rumors that you have severely punished them for assaulting those two village girls."

The wealthy merchant was overjoyed when he heard the advice, and he gave a thumb up, saying, “Third brother, what a great plan. Men, give those two beasts a good thrashing.”

Those two pitiable short fat men had no idea why receiving an additional beating would be a good idea, but they had no choice, and thus could only curse their third uncle vehemently in their hearts.

After finishing up the matters at hand, third brother Zhao turned to Zhao Quansheng, saying, “Quansheng-ah, you have handled the matter very well today, I am very pleased. When we return, I will put in a good word for you in front of sect master Shitu.”

Hearing so, Zhao Quansheng was elated as he replied, “This is due to you providing me with excellent direction every day, Quansheng is willing to be the saddle of your horse for victory.”

The wealthy merchant also added, “Quansheng ah, this is all thanks to you. I will have to show my appreciation properly. Men, bring me a thousand silvers.”

Zhao Quansheng replied, “Please do not stand on the ceremony. The reason why I went out was to protect the young masters anyway.”

Hallmaster Zhao said, “Just take it, it is well deserved. If not for you, this matter would not be settled with a few thousand silvers.”

Zhao Quansheng then courteously received the checks and put them in his breast.

At this moment, Hallmaster Zhao spoke again, “Quansheng ah, quickly send word to sect master Shitu that Piaomiao sect has their people appearing in Lu town, although we do not know the reason for their presence.”

Zhao Quansheng accepted the orders and left the wealthy merchant’s house immediately. Not long later, he walked into a remote house and in another short while, the windows of that house opened and a pigeon carrier flew out into the sky.

The pigeon can fly pretty fast, but it flew until the sky turned dark before it reached a secluded village. As it swooped down from the air, it flew directly towards the east of the village. That was part of a humongous community, and

although the surrounding fence was not too high, there were many houses scattered along the walls. These houses were constructed in the same style, being not too high with gray walls and gray rooftop. The pigeon flew into one of these houses, and upon entering the house, was uncertain of which room to enter.

Just as it landed on the window sill making its “coo coo” sounds, a well-dressed man walked out from a room and with quick steps, reached the window sill. When the pigeon saw this man, it “coo” and flew onto his arm. The man retrieved a small pipe from the pigeon’s leg, and then caressed the pigeon’s back before taking out some snacks and scattered them onto the table. Seeing the snacks, the pigeon flapped its wings towards the table and started pecking furiously. The man then took the small pipe and went out of the house.

When he walked out of the house and passed by several alleys, he finally reached the center of the community where a slightly larger house was situated. Knocking carefully on the door of the larger house, he heard a hoarse cough from inside before a severe voice saying, “Enter.”

The man carefully opened the door and walked into the house. The windows in the house were opened, and the oil lamps were not lit up; a slightly skinny figure was leaning out from the window, his hands on his back as he looked at the scenery outside. The first man bowed before saying respectfully, “Hallmaster Shitu, Hallmaster Zhao has sent over some news.”

The figure grunted and said, “What kind of news must be passed on so urgently on New Year day? Quickly turn the lights on.”

The man lit the oil lamps, while Hallmaster Shitu turned around. The man respectfully presented the pipe which the Hallmaster Shitu casually took, and rolled out the piece of paper inside, moving closer to the light, and upon reading the contents, he wrinkled his brows muttering, “... Why would they come to such a remote town?” Then, he burnt the piece of paper and threw a glance towards the other man, saying, “Leave.”

The other man bowed respectfully before dispensing himself, leaving the hallmaster to sit by the oil lamp in solitude.

Hallmaster Shitu knew that this piece of news had to be made known to his

own sect master, but he was unaware of the whereabouts of the latter, because just last night, the sect master has informed him of her absence today to deal with an important matter. When he tried to find the sect master earlier this morning, he discovered that the sect master had already left.

Just as the Hallmaster Shitu tried to guess his sect master's possible whereabouts, the strong-willed, stubborn elder sister of his was respectfully following a brocaded-robed young man, whispering in a low voice "Gentleman Ma, this is the highest mountain peak of our Lu town, named Shiren peak, the reason being that there exists a stone which looks like a person. If we were to hasten our speed, we would be able to reach the mountains within a half incense worth of time. However, I am not clear on the location that gentleman wishes to go, so I am unable to provide a specific estimated time of arrival."

Gentleman Ma turned his head and flashed his horse whip, and said in a warm voice, "Sect master Shitu, you do not have to be so careful around me. The sect master Wang has recommended you as a guide, and I have never treated you as an outsider ever since. After I have finished my task, you shall be rewarded. As for which part of the mountain I am heading towards, I will let you know after we enter the mountains."

As Shitu Ping received the gaze of the gentleman with skin as smooth as jade and high thick brows, she lowered her head wordlessly. She knew in her heart that this gentleman Ma comes from a prestigious background, and despite her success using her feminine guiles on Wujian sect's Wang Hong, since this is her first meeting with gentleman Ma, and the trip so far has been uneventful, how would she dare to attempt the same act? Instead, she planned to keep her mind clear and carefully proceed for this mission.

Thus, both people ride onward in the twilight.

On the other side of the mountain, Wen Wenhai and his junior sister was riding at full speed towards the same mountain peak.

Seeing that they are approaching the peak, Wen Wenhai slowly kept his reins and slowed the horse, before looking back at his junior sister saying, "Junior sister, the mountain in front of our eyes is our final destination. What say we grab a bite first and rest for a moment before entering the mountain fully

recharged to cope with any situation, since there may be an impending tough battle ahead?”

The junior sister nodded and the couple got off their horses, took out some dry rations and started eating. After they finished their meal, they drank a bit of water, and the junior sister worryingly asked, “Senior brother, since you said that this mission was of paramount importance, why did master not make his way personally here, or at least send one of the outstanding senior disciples instead of us? His decisions are truly befuddling.”

Wen Wenhai took another gulp of water, looked at the surroundings and said in a low voice, “Senior sister, our master surely has his reasons for doing what he does. Before we left, he did inform me not to raise the attention of other sects, and the reason why he sent the second generation disciples was precisely to avoid any unwanted attention. Furthermore, an elder will be taking charge of us, and we will only know more when the time is ripe. This is a good opportunity for us to receive the praise of our master without risking our lives.”

The junior sister said, “I initially thought that this place would be secluded and highly dangerous, but along our journey, I could see fresh mountain spring flowing from it and even though I have not entered the mountain, I could already tell that it is very majestic. It is such a pity that we are here in the night and are unable to enjoy the scenery.”

Wen Wenhai slapped his forehead, “Junior sister is actually thinking this way, I as a senior brother truly cannot compare. Is this the reason why my progress in martial arts is below yours?”

Junior sister did not answer, and the expression of her face under the veil was also hidden. Wen Wenhai asked again, “Junior sister, the sky has turned dark, why don’t you take off the veil. There will be no people around here.”

Junior sister continued to remain silent.

Wen Wenhai has already gotten used to his junior sister, and said to himself, “Okay then, it seems like the time has almost arrived. Let us take action now, and we should be able to reach at the predestined hour.”

As Shitu Ping accompanied the brocaded-robed gentleman Ma into the mountain, and when they reached before a particular mountain, gentleman Ma

stopped his horse and got off, while the sect master followed suit. Gentleman Ma said, "Sect master Shitu, do you know the direction of the five claw peak?"

The sect master Ping replied, "Of course I do, Five claw peak is the five smaller mountains beside Shiren peak. It received its name because it is shaped like a monkey's curved fingers. There is no direct road to it, so we cannot bring the horses in. We can only climb through these mountains to reach your destination."

Hearing so, gentleman Ma smiled and let go of his reins, allowing the horse to gallop along a small road by itself to look for dried grass. Shitu Ping also released her horse, and it followed gentleman Ma's horse as it seemed to have grown close to it.

Gentleman Ma said, "Then I must trouble sect master Shitu to show me the way."

Shitu Ping did not stand on ceremony and started to head towards the mountain peak while displaying her qinggong.

As Shitu Ping raised the qi in her dantian, she sped continuously for two incense stick worth of time, while slowly feeling her qi run out, and when it was insufficient, she slowed her pace and from behind she heard the gentle voice of gentleman Ma, "Sect master, the time is still early. Since we have been rushing overnight, shall we temporarily slow our pace and recover our strength? What do you think?"

Sect master Ping heard his unhurried voice which was not the least breathless, and without needing to turn around, she could imagine gentleman Ma behind her back striding casually, thus realizing that the reputations of those prestigious sects were well deserved. Then, she replied, "Thanks gentleman for his consideration." Then she halted and walked over to a small trail in a relaxed pace. Gentleman Ma hurriedly flew from behind until he was beside her shoulder, and asked as he paced her, "Has sect master Shitu ever come to this five claw peak?"

Shitu Ping replied, "I have done so in autumn. The mountain air here is fresh so we would often come here to seclude ourselves in training. Five claw peak has the sweetest mountain spring, so we would sometimes spend the night there."

Gentleman Ma nodded, and followed up with another question, “Then does this five claw peak have any unusual spots?”

Shitu Ping inquired, “Gentleman has come here before? How would you know that five claw peak have strange places?”

Gentleman Ma smiled, “If I ever did come before, why would I need sect master Shitu to lead the way?”

Shitu Ping replied, “I was slightly surprised, please do not blame me for my ignorance. Speaking of this five claw peak, its scenery is not much different from Shiren peak, and its spring water is indeed much sweeter than the other mountains. However, the strange area is at the middle finger of the five claw peak. Half of the mountain has jujube trees, and its total area is frighteningly large. While other people have ever ventured in there before, not many of the mountain inhabitants at Shiren peak would dare to enter that forest. According to them, there are vicious man-eating beasts inhabiting the forest, and the people who previously went inside to pick jujubes all never came back, so very few would be brave enough to enter. Last year, I brought a group of our fellow sect disciples. To navigate inside, we let a wolfdog in but it never came back out. Hence, we did not dare to enter too deep and only searched around at the outer perimeters.”

Shitu Ping did not withhold any inside information as she shared her story with gentleman Ma, who was obviously pleased as he replied, “It is great that Shitu knows where the place is. In a short while, I may have to request your help in leading us there.”

Shitu Ping was startled, “Us? Gentleman Ma, are there more people coming?”

Gentleman Ma smiled as he said, “Naturally there will be other people. However, we will have to head towards the first peak of five claw peak to wait for their arrival. If Shitu has rested enough, then we should continue on our journey.”

Shitu Ping replied, “Sure gentleman Ma, follow me.”

Chapter 10: Secret forest

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Secret forest

The mountains were extremely quiet in the night, there were not many bird and cricket sounds. Once in a while a howl of a wolf would break the silence of the night, signaling the lurking dangers in the mountains. It was a new moon that night, and the moon has already slept behind the clouds. Looking up at the dark clouds, one would wonder when a silver of moonlight would peek out. Fortunately, Shitu Ping and gentleman Ma are people with martial arts background; their eyesight is sharper than ordinary people, which is why they could traverse across the darkness of the mountains.

Once they reached five claw peak, only the deadly quiet scenery was before them, apart from sound of the wind. Five claw peak's thumb peak is a fat and short peak, and one cannot discern its height in the darkness. At the east of the mountain was a flat square area, covered in weeds and fallen leaves which would rustle when stepped on. Upon seeing the place, gentleman Ma said to Shitu Ping, "Yes, this is the place. Let us wait here." Then, he walked across the field to an ox-sized rock and sat on it, not saying another word. Shitu Ping also followed behind him, but she did not jump on the rock, but instead stood beside it her hands clutching on her precious sword, her eyes staring warily and observing this familiar place on an unfamiliar night.

The wind kept blowing, but the couple remained motionless, and the time taken to boil a kettle of tea passed just like that.

Suddenly, gentleman Ma opened his eyes and glanced towards the north side of the forest. Sensing gentleman Ma's movement, Shitu Ping followed suit and strained her ears, but was unable to discern anything. Just as she was feeling curious, she could hear people flying from the north forest using their qinggong.

Again she could not help but feel that disciples from prestigious sects are truly worthy of their reputation.

Not long later, the people who were travelling through the darkness of the night appeared in front of their eyes, and indeed, they were Wen Wenhao and his junior sister. From their figures, it was apparent that they had also freed their horses at the base of the mountain and climbed up the mountain themselves. Wen Wenhao did not jump off the tree immediately and instead observed the scene in front of them before he signaled his junior sister to descend from the tree. Instead of greeting the other party, he followed gentleman Ma's behavior and sat under the tree and closed his eyes. His junior sister did not choose to stand, but instead took out a mat from her bundle and laid it on the ground, before sitting on the mat. From her behavior, it looked as if she was resting.

Gentleman Ma then closed his eyes again, as if he did not notice the other party's arrival, and Shitu Ping had no choice but to stand beside quietly.

Not long after again, everyone opened their eyes again and looked towards the small trail that was across the field. From the small trail was the sounds of footsteps, but in the stillness of the night where one could only hear the sounds of the wind blowing, these footsteps sounds stood out clearly. The footsteps continued in a steady rhythm and continued to become louder, but the figure of the person was still not visible. The four people were filled with anticipation; they wanted to know who could be walking in the mountains.

When the person walked close enough, everyone was even more surprised that it was actually two people with the exact same rhythm, walking shoulder to shoulder, although one could not see in the darkness if they were twins. Nevertheless, seeing that their steps were larger than ordinary people by half a foot, everyone could already guess their identities, and they all thought at the same time, "I see, the other party is them."

As the two people neared the clearing, they saw the other two parties and chose to remain silent as well. Instead of continuing to walk onto the clearing, they just stood there completely motionless.

Another time taken to boil a kettle of tea passed, and just as everyone was feeling anxious, a sound descended from the sky above, "The chilly surrounding

state, old me has arrived late, please pardon for the wait.” The figure of a person suddenly appeared in the middle of the clearing, and all the six people opened their eyes at the same time, as though they did not anticipate the arrival of this figure, but at the same time they asked, “Sir Yanming?”

In the middle of the clearing, with a long large body, while wearing a head scarf in addition to his robes which colors were not visible in the night, a thin face with a long beard; it did match the appearance of a famous figure in Jianghu. Without any hesitation, everyone greeted, “We pay our greetings to Sir Yanming.”

Sir Yanming combed his right hand through his beard and smiled, “Old me has arrived late and caused everyone some inconvenience. Since we are not acquainted yet, shall everyone make a short introduction of themselves, as the mission later would require co-operation from each other.”

The brocaded robe gentleman Ma cupped his fists towards everyone and said, “The humble me is Thousand Swords Peak’s Ma Xiangyang. This is Shitu Ping from the Fierce Tiger sect.” Then, to preempt any misunderstandings, he continued, “The Fierce Tiger sect is headquartered in the vicinity, she is my subordinate who will be our guide later on.”

Sir Yanming smiled, “Young hero Ma sure is meticulous; we shall be relying on sect master Shitu later.”

Shitu Ping immediately answered politely, “To assist everyone, I am extremely honored.”

Next, Wen Wenhai cupped his fists and greeted, “The humble me is Piaomiao sect’s Wen Wenhai, and this is my junior sister Xue Qing.” Xue Qing then took her veil off to reveal her appearance, but no one could make out her features in the darkness of the night, and she chose to remain silently and only cupped her fists towards everyone.

Sir Yanming replied, “I have long heard of Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing’s great name, and now that we have met, I see that your reputation is deserved.”

Lastly, the two quiet men who were standing aside cupped their fists and said, “Tan family, Tan Wen” “Tan Wu” Their rough voices resounded one after another, and with their matching tall heights, they looked awe-inspiring.

After listening to everyone's introduction, Sir Yanming kept back his smile and said, "Good, it is my turn. I am Yanming mountain sect master Sir Yanming. From now on, everyone is acquainted, and we are aware of each other's backgrounds, so we can begin our mission."

"To have come here, you must have received orders from your respective elders to follow my instructions. I have also formed an agreement with your elders, and as for the details, I shall explain as we walk over. Now, bring out the items in your hands."

After he spoke, Sir Yanming took out a square piece of leather parchment from his breast, while Ma Xiangyang, Wen Wenhai and Tan Wen followed suit. Sir Yanming passed his parchment over to Ma Xiangyang and said, "Piece them together." Thus, everyone handed their parchment to Ma Xiangyang, while Sir Yanming took out a glowing night pearl and passed it to Shitu Ping, saying, "Please take a look at the map."

Thus, Shitu Ping received the glowing pearl and assisted Ma Xiangyang to piece the map pieces together. Under the light of the glowing pearl, everyone could see the map of an area which looked like a palm with five fingers, and there was a circle on the thumb of the hand. Shitu Ping observed the map, looked at Ma Xiangyang, and then said, "Indeed, this is a map of five-claw peak. This circle is at the position of the middle finger."

Everyone looked towards Sir Yanming who said, "So far so good, everyone had brought the things that they should." Ma Xiangyang then returned each piece to their respective owners, while Shitu Ping returned the glowing night pearl to Sir Yanming. Receiving the pearl back, Sir Yanming asked, "Does Shitu Ping recognize the circled area in the map?"

Shitu Ping replied, "That is a forest of jujube trees, I have been there before and set a wolf dog inside but it never returned."

Sir Yanming said, "In that case, we will rely on sect master Shitu to lead us to the area."

Shitu Ping replied, "Understood. Everyone please follow me." Saying which, she demonstrated her qinggong and flew over to their destination.

Sir Yanming took a glance at Ma Xiangyang, Wen Wenhai and Tan Wen, and

they nodded their heads in reply, using their qinggong to follow their guide.

Finally, Sir Yanming looked at his surroundings, and seeing nothing peculiar, he shot off and followed behind everyone else, leaving behind the ox-sized rock in the clearing. As the wind blew over the leaves and weeds, all the signs they left there would be erased soon after.

Thus, a row of seven people were using qinggong to follow behind Shitu Ping like a jolt of electricity through the pitch darkness of the night. Within the time for two incense sticks to be burnt, they finally reached the entrance of the aforementioned jujube forest. By this time, the moon should have crossed its peak, and only dark clouds would be in the sky, signaling that in a while morning is about to come, now is the darkest period of the night.

The jujube forest was not clearly visible in the night. But to Shitu Ping, this area was like a huge monster entrenched into the mountain. Although she did not know its secret, she could guess that it was something important and dangerous for four major factions to co-operate and covertly enter.

Stopping her footsteps, Shitu Ping waited until everyone has arrived, and respectfully said, "Everyone, this is the jujube forest which was circled on the map according to my deductions."

Sir Yanming replied, "There should be no mistakes." Then, without looking any further, he sat on the ground and seeing the puzzled looks on everyone's faces, he explained smilingly, "There is still some time before we commence our operation. Everyone should take a rest, and I will explain the backstory to you. Otherwise, with what you know now, I am afraid there may be some accident when you enter later."

Thus, the other six people followed his lead and sat on the ground in a semi-circle surrounding Sir Yanming.

Sir Yanming paused to organize his thoughts, and then looked at the younger generation who were seated beside him, and asked, "Have either of you heard of the single-armed sword master from three hundred years ago?" Everyone shook their heads. "Before the February of last year, neither did I nor your elders heard of him too."

"On the February of last year, my wife and I went to Dragon god shrine to pray.

In the shrine, I actually met your thousand swords peak's sect master Wan Jiucheng and his family, as well as your Piaomiao sect's sect head Ou Peng, and Tan family's master Tan Yefeng. Even though we have heard of each other's names, we have yet to meet before and to take advantage of this rare opportunity, we all decided to ditch our family members and find a place to exchange pointers while comparing who could hold their liquor best."

"We took our swords and wine and went to Wutong mountain which was beside Yu city, and were prepared to spend a few days there then unexpectedly, we had a peculiar encounter there."

Chapter 11: The past

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

The past

“What encounter?” Xue Qing and Shitu Ping asked at the same time.

Sir Yanming continued, “The four of us were carrying rare wine, some accompanying dishes and our swords to the peak of the mountain, and it was early in the morning just as the sun begin to rise when we found that under a large willow tree at the peak, there was already someone else who occupied the area.”

“It was long white haired old beggar, whose face was rosy with vigor, lying casually on a rock platform under the tree. As sunlight touched his body, we felt as if we saw an immortal.” Sir Yanming smiled with his eyes and slowly talked, as if he was reliving that particular memory.

“Only his tattered clothes were not a match to his appearance, because they were those of a beggar, so we thought that perhaps he was an elder from the Beggar sect, but he did not carry a pouch with him. When that old beggar saw us approaching, he asked if we knew martial arts. We nodded in agreement, and he asked again if we had wine and meat. We simply nodded again. He then told us to bring the wine and delicacies out. That day, it was I who was carrying the food, and I followed his instructions without much thinking. Seeing the food, his eyes gleamed brightly which was uncharacteristic of our image of him.”

“As he took our food, he ravenously wolfed it all down without hesitation, and surprisingly, the four of us just stared dumbly as we watched him do so until all our food was finished. Then, he wiped his mouth and exclaimed that the wine and food were delicious, before praising us for being ‘not bad’.”

“Then, the old beggar took out an old leather parchment from his breast, cut it

into four, and gave one to each of us. When I received mine and was about to look at it, the old beggar took out another small book and threw it over to us casually. After doing so, he lied back down on the rock and ignored us. We were perspiring from nervousness, and as we took out the parchment for a closer look, they were the parchment that you all possess now, but we had no idea how to use it. Thus, we opened the booklet which he threw to us, and the contents made us surprised and overjoyed. Then, we knew that we had just gained a treasure.”

“According to the booklet, the parchment was a map of the treasure trove of a swordsman named Quda who lived three hundred years ago, and this treasure throve is hidden in the jujube forest that is currently before us. In the past, Quda had gotten hold of this treasure map and entered the treasure trove. Then, he found sword manuals and precious pills, trained in isolation for ten years, before becoming one of the top heroes in Jianghu. After he completed his training, he did not take out the sword manual and pills, and instead left them here to wait for a new heir to inherit these treasures. Honestly, the four of us were so excited then that our hearts boiled, but recalling the time stated in the book, we then realized that only on the fifteenth of each year would the entrance to the place be opened up, and thus the four of us calmed down.”

Sir Yanming looked at the sky which was gradually brightening, and continued, “Honestly, seeing this enticing biscuit suddenly dropped from the sky, we were dazed with happiness. However, when we regained our senses, we felt that this was just too good to be true, but the old beggar was still lying on the rock not making any movement. We just waited with our bellies full of curiosity, but we soon realize that the old beggar was not sleeping, he was not even breathing anymore. As we stepped closer for a better view, we realized that he indeed passed away. Thus, we buried him, and then we discussed on a plan to obtain the treasures. However, the time was not ripe yet then, so we returned to our respective factions, and then decide on a better course of action.”

The next time we met, we had already done our research, and indeed three hundred years before, there was a one-armed swordsman with a very common name, Quda, whose martial arts was profound, and his personality was upright. There were countless reports then of his heroic acts in Jianghu, but no one knew

of his birth and background, and the investigations on his origins and teacher all yield no results. This Quda would never exchange pointers with his counterparts, citing the reason that his sword was drawn to kill, and each blade will only shed blood. In fact, he was not interested in getting famous, so nobody could get an opportunity to spar with him. Nevertheless, according to an account from the number one in Jianghu, Qingmao sect master, he has seen Quda's swordplay and felt that his own skills were not as deadly and emotionless. Hearing so, the whole of Jianghu was in a big uproar, and no one would dare to step on Quda's shoes."

"However, there were people who wanted to gain fame for themselves, and they would request to spar with Quda, yet they were also rejected because Quda would hide himself, until one time when he saw the second top martial artist among the unorthodox sects massacre a village, and in a fit of fury killed the evil-doer. Since then, no one would dare to approach him in fear of giving up their lives. Quda lived in Yunzhou, which is called Pingyang city. Three hundred years later, and no bandits would dare misbehave there."

"Actually, what we admire most was not his abilities, or sword technique, thousand swords peak being the exception." Sir Yanming smiled towards Ma Xiangyang, "We found out that this Quda actually lived until a hundred and twenty years old."

"Ah~" the six youngsters who were listening to the story gasped spontaneously.

The martial art practitioners in Jianghu are no different from ordinary people. They live among bloodshed every day and are susceptible to internal and external injuries. When we are young, these injuries do not affect us much, but in our old age they would have severe repercussions on our daily lives. Unless the person practices a profound inner body technique, very few people would live past eighty years, not to mention a hundred and twenty. Thus, it was indeed miraculous."

At this moment, the eyes of the youngsters gleamed, and they all wondered if they could obtain the miraculous pills in the treasure trove. Actually, everyone had the same idea; they had not much interest in the sword manuals because they could not even finish learning their own sect's techniques, when would they have the time to learn a different set of instructions? Even if it was a top

instruction manual, they would still require years of hard effort in order to truly benefit from it. They all knew that they were no longer young, and their meridians have already set, even if they were to train again they would require twice the effort to achieve half the results, so which idiot would do so? Instead, it would be better to gain some personal advantages and live for another decade. With another decade, they could enjoy life for ten more years; they could train their martial arts for ten more years. Of course, if they do find some top instruction manual, they could bring it back to their respective factions as a significant contribution and improve their status within. Looking around, everyone realized that they all had similar thoughts.

Looking at the expressions on the faces of the younger generation around him, Sir Yanming smiled and continued, “Thus, us four continued to discuss on how to retrieve the treasure. With the power of our respective factions, and with our interest being sustained by the rewards, we managed to find this Shiren peak two months ago. Finally, as we had agreed upon earlier, we only sent second generation disciples in order to not attract the attention of other sects, because even the first generation disciples could attract undesired attention, and it will be up to me who do not have any disciples to lead the expedition.”

“Of course, you are all reliable figures within your factions, and are part of their future core power. Thus, we have already to let you keep whatever treasure you find later on.” At that moment, everyone’s spirits soared as they finally realize why their elders sent them over other disciples. Sir Yanming continued, “Now, I am going to say the most important point, how we will be splitting the treasures.” Upon hearing, everyone immediately focused their attention and opened their ears. “If the treasures can be split equally, then it will be done so. If not, we will split as evenly as we can, and as for the remainders, how do you think we are going to split them up?”

Everyone was surprised for a moment, this Sir Yanming truly has a sense of humor, to think that he is still trying to test his juniors at this point of time. No wonder their respective elders were willing to let him lead them. Wen Wenhai rubbed his nose and said, “Sir, Jianghu has its own rules, I think it will be better if we compete for the treasures using our martial arts.” The rest also tacitly agreed. Sir Yanming continued enigmatically, “That was how your elders decided

as well. First, we thought of competing through our sword techniques, but only thousand swords peak was agreeable. Then, we thought of competing through fist stances, but only Piaomiao sect was agreeable. It was the same case for a competition of leg stances. Thus, we thought of a completion of two out of three rounds, but your elders were reluctant because that would increase the chances of you all getting hurt, and we ended up having a large quarrel. Finally, I proposed a solution, which settled the matter in one sentence. Can you guess what I said?”

Everyone had a blank face on; their eyes were squinted as they thought hard while Sir Yanming looked on encouragingly. Finally, Xue Qing stammered with her face red, “El...Elder, could it be through scissors paper stone?” After speaking, her whole face flushed red. Sir Yanming exclaimed in surprise, “Heroine Xue is truly astute to be able to guess correctly” Everyone burst out in laughter, but only Wen Wenhai’s face looked weird.

Everyone looked “respectfully” at this thin faced elder who despite his illustrious reputation which was as warm hearted as an elder relative and thought in their hearts, “How could there be such a large difference among people, their own elders would put on a wooden expression every day, when would they see such a relaxed style of instruction.”

Just as everyone was thinking of their own masters, only Sir Yanming saw a silver of sunlight and smacked his forehead, saying, “Quick, to the forest. Do not miss the timing.”

After he finished his sentence, he ran ahead into the outer perimeter of the forest. At this moment, the early sun rose from the the side of the mountain, and a lightning fast shadow swept over to the other side of the forest, passing through the middle of two trees in the direction of Shiren peak.

Chapter 12: Notify

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Notify

As the first ray of sunlight shone on the jujube forest, Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes and sparkling lights seem to appear in the black of his pupils.

Zhang Xiaohua did not get up immediately like he usually would, but continued to lay on the platform and closed his eyes again. After being slapped until it was swollen, his face did not have the tingling burning sensation of yesterday, and the mouth which was hurt until it was too painful to speak was also feeling fine. While his exterior injuries healed slowly, when would his inner trauma heal?

Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts automatically returned to the events that had happened in the last yesterday afternoon. His father was not in the wrong when he tried to stop his eldest brother from entering into the fray. One should avoid situations that are out of ones' own waters. His eldest brother was also not in the wrong for trying to help, meeting lady Liu could be counted as a fated encounter, and even if she was a total stranger, if one were to standby aside while watching someone else being bullied, then his conscience would suffer an irreversible blow.

Thinking of the surrounding spectators, there were so many people, their faces were either wooden with disinterest, excited over someone else's misfortune, or just sympathy, yet did they ever thought of joining in to help?

Then he thought back to the two short fat men and the pack of dog-like manservants being arrogant and overbearing, while blatantly committing a crime in daylight.

Then, he thought back to the scene where his father and two elder brothers were being trampled upon by the goons, being hit mercilessly by flurries of kicks

and punches. Perhaps those goons were not after their lives, but were assaulting them out of pleasure, because seeing fresh blood would raise their excitement, but what if those goons were after their lives? Would his family be able to avoid them?

Then he thought back to Wen Wenhai and his junior sister descending from the sky, defeating those goons as casually as if they were flipping their palms over. They did not even bother to share their names to that Zhao Quansheng person, and with just a few strokes and a plaque, they shut him up and forced the evil doers to repent.

A thought shot like electricity through his mind, martial arts!

I need strength, I need martial arts.

This time, if they did not meet Wen Wenhai and his junior sister, if they had not chosen to intervene, then his own family would have been subjected to more beatings and may even lose their lives. Relying on an external help was akin to relying on air, one had to rely on oneself. Only after one had sufficient power would he be able to protect his loved ones, while protecting others.

Zhang Xiaohua felt as though the knot in his chest which appeared since yesterday has finally loosened. Similar to how he reclaimed that plot of field, with a goal in mind, anything can be done. He does not lack the ability, was not afraid of pain or difficulties, but rather needed directions on how to achieve his goal.

After deciding on the direction of his life, Zhang Xiaohua no longer wanted to stay in bed, he picked himself up and walked out of his grandmother's room to the welcoming sunlight.

However, the excited Zhang Xiaohua was still naively unaware of how difficult the road of a martial artist was. Background, talent, perseverance, opportunity... These were the necessary requirements, but how many youths could reach their goal so easily? Every youth have their own goals, whether or not they succeed or fail, they would have acted on an impulse and would have suffered some setbacks. Everyone has their own road, and only by walking on it would they know if their ideals were right. Zhang Xiaohua was no different!

As Zhang Xiaohua walked out of the room, he saw his grandmother at the

doorsteps, and walked over “Grandmother, the day is still early, and there is some cold wind blowing outside. Go back into the house, and when it is close to noon, you can come out again to enjoy the sun.”

Hearing her grandson’s voice, his grandmother replied tenderly, “Xiaohua, grandmother wants to enjoy more of the air outside. I am already living day by day, and do not want to spend my time cooped indoors. What about you, does your body still hurt? You should go back and sleep a little longer.”

Zhang Xiaohua said joyfully, “Grandmother, I have already recovered fully. Here, feel my face, it is no longer swollen.”

Zhang Xiaohua took his grandmother’s rough hands and placed them on his face, while his grandmother carefully felt while smiling, “Good, good. As long as you are fine...” After saying so, she used her sleeves to dab off the tears in her eyes, her love for her youngest grandson was apparent for anyone to see.

At the courtyard, Guo Sufei was at the stove which was supported by some simple beams making breakfast, while Liu Qing and Liu Yue were aside assisting her, seemingly happy. However, Liu Qing seemed to be feeling slightly shy, in fact, Zhang Xiaohua rubbed his eyes when he thought he saw a tinge of flush on Liu Qing’s face. Strange, what is going on?

Zhang Xiaohua would not have known that Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue have awoken before daybreak, because they were not feeling comfortable sleeping over at another place out of their homes, and in order not to awake Guo Sufei, they cuddled closely together and whispered in low voices to discuss yesterday’s happenings. Liu Qing was feeling especially grateful to Zhang Xiaolong, because if not for his timely intervention, she would have been dragged into the alleys where her fate would be much worse. Furthermore, Zhang Xiaolong had fractured his own arm while saving the two ladies, and despite being trampled upon and being severely injured, his determination to rescue the ladies was so evident on his face that it was etched deeply into her heart.

Not long after, Guo Sufei woke up and eavesdropped on the ladies. Seeing that the sun was about to rise, she coughed a few times and sat up, while the two ladies tensed up immediately. Last night, she was too preoccupied with her family’s injuries and did not get the chance to look carefully at the ladies. Now

that her family's injuries have somewhat stabilized, she realized that ladies were very pretty, and their figures were not bad as well. Even though their heights were different, but there are many different types of beautiful flowers as well. But of course, if they were not attractive, how could they have piqued the interest of those bullies? Next, Zhang Xiaolong's mother inquired about family circumstances of the two ladies, and she learnt that Liu Qing came from a family of three, her father and elder brother being the other two, and her mother had passed away years ago from an illness. Liu Qing's father was a scholarly teacher, while her elder brother was also pursuing the academia, so their household does not own any farmland and relies on teaching students for a living, and thus has a high reputation in the village. Liu Yueyue is Liu Qing's cousin, and her father is a butcher, being Liu Qing's father's brother, and they lived together in the same village. Liu Yueyue is the only child in her family of three. Yesterday, Liu Qing's family was hosting some visitors, while Liu Yueyue's father was opening his shop as usual, thus there was no men to accompany them to town, which resulted in the events yesterday. The three ladies started chatting more comfortably, and Guo Sufei even asked if the two ladies have any engagement to which both said no. Although Liu Yueyue was unaffected, Liu Qing's face turned red, which made Guo Sufei overjoyed beyond words.

When the sun was up, Guo Sufei started making breakfast, and the two ladies offered to help. Liu Qing's face was still flushed from the conversation, which was why Zhang Xiaohua could pick it up.

Zhang Xiaohua walked over to the stove and greeted, "Good morning elder sisters."

Even though it was a normal greeting, when Liu Qing picked up the word "elder sister", she felt as if the young boy before her could read her mind, and her face flushed redder. Liu Yueyue happily replied, "Morning little brother."

Zhang Xiaohua asked after his father and elder brothers, and Guo Sufei replied that she had already taken a look and there were not much changes, their external wounds have recovered to some extent, but they have not fully recovered their energy and it will be some time before they do.

As they were talking, Zhang Cai walked out of the house, his holds being supported by a wooden clutch, as he limped step by step while his right leg was

evidently still hurting. Guo Sufei and Zhang Xiaohua went over to support him, Zhang Xiaohua brought his father a chair and put it at the courtyard. Zhang Cai stretched a little, and he could still feel his waist hurting.

Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue went over to give their morning greetings, which Zhang Cai said was unnecessary, “You two ladies did not return home last night, I am sure that your family is worried. The men in our family are still injured, and we cannot let Zhang Xiaohua accompany you by himself. Why don’t I get Xiaohua and some of the villagers to send a letter to your family to get them to fetch you? Would that be okay?”

Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue exchanged glances and nodded in agreement.

Then, Zhang Cai followed Zhang Xiaohua to the village to find an adult, and the two people went to Bali Gou to deliver the letter to Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue’s families.

Bali Gou was at the southwest of Guo village, and the distance between the two places was not small. By the time Zhang Xiao reached Bali Gou, it was already midday. Bali Gou as located in a ravine, and one could see from afar that it is very big, about four to five times the size of Guo village. There were many more villagers, so when Zhang Xiaohua reached the village entrance, there was already someone who saw him arrive and asked who he was looking for. Zhang Xiaohua replied that he was looking for teacher Liu which made the man cautious, but seeing that Zhang Xiaohua was not very well dressed and was accompanied by an honest-looking farmer, he asked, “Where are you from? Why are you looking for teacher Liu?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “We are from Guo village, to pass some news of elder sisters Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue to him.”

The person was overjoyed and he replied, “Great, quickly follow me.”

Then, he led Zhang Xiaohua and the other man through a small path to a tidy courtyard, and before walking through the door, he shouted, “Teacher Liu, butcher Liu, news of your daughters have arrived.”

Then, a loud voice resounded from the house, “Ah, the kidnappers have sent a letter. I am just going to see which fellow is responsible for this.” Following the voice, a large sturdy man who was at least two heads taller than Zhang Xiaohua

walked out, and grabbed Zhang Xiaohua by his collar, saying, “Talk. Which bandit group are you from, talk.” Zhang Xiaohua was lifted in the air and he was unable to catch his breath, much less answer. Then, another person walked out of the house and said, “Second brother, you cannot be so impolite. Look at this boy, his posture, his attire, do they look like they belong to a bandit? Even if he was one, you would still need to allow him to talk.”

The strong man smiled and loosened his hands, “Big brother, I am just too anxious about our daughters. Aren’t you feeling anxious too?”

Zhang Xiaohua gulped down some air, and his face gradually turned less blue. Looking at the two men, he knew that the large man was Liu Yueyue’s father, butcher Liu and the calm man was Li Qing’s father, teacher Liu.

Chapter 13: Entering the forest

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Entering the forest

The person who brought Zhang Xiaohua then spoke up, "Butcher Liu has maligned another good person, this little brother had walked all the way from Guo village to bring good news of your daughter. It appears that you have lost control of your emotions again."

Butcher Liu did not mind his fellow villager's words, and patted Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders with his large hands, and said, "Looks like this little brother is magnanimous, why would he take a such a little joke to heart?"

Seeing the large palms that were marked with years of experience of slaughtering pigs, he thought in his heart, "Of course I do mind, why don't you lend me some of your guts. I rather not be close to you, my body has only just recovered recently." However, on the outside, he replied politely, "How would I dare, this esteemed person must be elder sister Liu Yueyue's father, since you appear just as majestic as her." And in his heart, he thought "as majestic as a bear"

Hearing Zhang Xiaohua's reply, butcher Liu was so happy that his eyes squinted in joy, saying, "Both you and Yueyue sing the same tune, has she... oh right, how did Yueyue and Qingqing end up in your village, are they doing okay?" Midway of his sentence, he remembered his daughter.

Teacher Liu who was standing at a side said, "Let us talk in the house, from this little brother's calm behaviour, I am sure that nothing major happened to the girls."

After finishing his sentence, he led Zhang Xiaohua and his guide, as well as the fellow villager who brought over the two visitors back towards the house. The

fellow villager interrupted, "I am not going in, I should be going back now. I can also call Liu Kai to come back on my way."

Teacher Liu nodded in gratitude, and send the villager back, before inviting Zhang Xiaohua into the house.

When Zhang Xiaohua entered the courtyard, he noted that there was not much difference from his own house, it was arranged simply but with less farming tools, and the stove area did not seemed to be used much. There were two rooms in front, and two additional rooms at the sides, which was unexpectedly more than they needed since they were only a family of three. Only after he entered did he realize his mistake. Upon entering the first room, there was a portrait of a wizened old scholar, and some plates of fruits and snacks before the portrait as though it was an altar. On the left wall was a painting of snow, and some people under a pavilion enjoying the snow, on the right was some calligraphy, written with much gusto as the characters were cursive and full of expressions, unfortunately Zhang Xiaohua could not recognize the words.

When Zhao Xiaohua realized the stark differences between this house and his own home, he thought in his heart, "Is this the difference between an educated person and a farmer's home?" Under the housekeeping of his mother, his home remained clean and tidy, and there were also a hanging on the wall, but it was just a picture of a deity, and his mother did not even bother to put flowers for worship. Zhang Xiaohua was struck with a sudden thought, "If elder sister Liu took over the housekeeping, what could become of our house?"

These thoughts ran through Zhang Xiaohua's mind as he stood silently on the spot, but it was not because he had lost his bearings, but rather, he was unsure of where to sit. There were only a few chairs at his house, and they would usually stand at home, but this teacher has so many chairs in his house, he is sure to be fastidious about manners and thus, Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to sit anywhere.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua's discomfort, teacher Liu immediately brought Zhang Xiaohua and his fellow villager to be seated, then, butcher Liu took out a kettle of tea to serve to their guests. Zhang Xiaohua took the cup and poured the contents into his mouth; the water had a rather nice taste. When butcher Liu saw that he emptied his cup, he immediately refilled the cup. Zhang Xiaohua and the fellow have been walking for the whole morning, and were already feeling

thirsty; put together the fact that the tea tasted so good, the two men finished four cups of tea at a go. Butcher Liu's expression then softened, even though he is boorish, he could tell the his visitors have travelled from faraway to the point of such thirst just to share the news of their daughters' safety.

After Zhang Xiaohua finished his cup of tea and was about to speak, he heard urgent footsteps coming from outside the house, and not long later, he saw a youth scholar whose height was similar to his eldest brother run into the room, and guessed that he must be Liu Qing's elder brother, Liu Kai. When Liu Kai entered the house, he first greeted teacher Liu and butcher Liu, and who then introduced Zhang Xiaohua and the fellow villager to him. When Liu Kai greeted Zhang Xiaohua, the latter was unsure of how to return the greetings so he made a little effort to do it. Only after then, Liu Kai turned towards teacher Liu and asked, "Where is younger sister?" When Zhang Xiaohua looked at this youth who was obviously much skinnier than his eldest brother, he sighed in his heart, "Sigh, learned people sure have many unnecessary customs. This elder brother Liu sure has patience to finish his greetings before asking any questions. If it was butcher Liu, he would have asked the moment he entered. Right, the latter must be thinking that this elder brother Liu has arrived at a poor time." Zhang Xiaohua could not help but turned to see butcher Liu who was still waiting anxiously for Zhang Xiaohua's explanation.

Indeed, before teacher Liu could speak, butcher Liu interrupted, "Why don't you take a sip first. This little brother has not even spoken up when you arrived."

Liu Kai then took the seat opposite Zhang Xiaohua, and drank his water slowly as he looked at Zhang Xiaohua, waiting for his reply.

Zhang Xiaohua then introduced himself, before narrating the previous day's events in a detailed way, but out of caution, he did not reveal the total amount of compensation from the bullies.

Zhang Xiaohua was not eloquent with his words, and his story was in bits and pieces, however, even so, the four men in the room felt as though their hearts were going to jump out of their mouths. Teacher Liu, butcher Liu and Liu Kai's faces were as pale as ash, butcher Liu even stood up from his chair on several occasions but he was persuaded back to his seat by teacher Liu at these times.

After Zhang Xiaohua finished his story, butcher Liu immediately poured two cups of water for Zhang Xiaohua, and the rest of the audience also drank a cup of water, as it seems that not only was the storyteller thirsty from speaking, his listeners felt their throats parching from anxiety.

After everyone had relieved their thirst, teacher Liu walked to Zhang Xiaohua's front and took a deep bow saying "This old man sincerely expresses his gratitude to your father and his sons for saving his daughter." Liu Kai and butcher Liu also scrambled quickly to bow, which shocked Zhang Xiaohua out of his chair, stammering that he could not dare to accept their bows, and worriedly return the bows.

Zhang Xiaohua comforted them and said "Elder sisters Liu are currently resting at my house and are alright now, you do not need to worry. "Actually, everyone was already aware that their loved ones are safe, but still could not fully calm down until they see them personally."

Until everyone was seated again, teacher Liu said, "Xiaohua has walked the whole morning to reach here from Guo village, it seems that we will not be able to bring our children back today. Why not second brother first return home and let your wife prepare some lunch for Zhang Xiaohua and his fellow villager, and let them have their meal first before returning to Guo village with Liu Kai. Then, we can fetch our children together tomorrow. What do you think?"

Butcher Liu replied, "No, it is better if I head off first. I am still unsettled, and part of the return journey back to Guo village will be in night-time, so it will be safer if I accompany them."

Teacher Liu deliberated shortly and agreed.

Thus, lunch was at butcher Liu's place. Liu Qing was not around so there was no one to prepare food at teacher Liu's home. Since Liu Yueyue's mother knew that her daughter was safe, she made an extravagant meal to thank her family's benefactors. Zhang Xiaohua was already feeling hungry, and coupled with the fact that he has not eaten red roast meat in a long while, he filled his tummy to the brim.

After the meal, Zhang Xiaohua, the fellow Guo villager and butcher Liu hurried towards Guo village without stop, and few hundred li away was a different scene

at five claw peak.

In the morning when the shadow passed between two trees, Sir Yanming shot his body through the forest. Luckily, he was an experienced martial artist with very sharp eyesight, otherwise it could have been easy to miss the opportunity. While the rest had not figure out what was going on, they only stared as Sir Yanming sped ahead. Sir Yanming was not angry, and he raised his voice, "Aren't you guys coming?"

When everyone reached the spot of the two trees and observed their surroundings, they could not feel any difference between this area and the rest of the jujube forest. Sir Yanming laughed, "There is no need to look any further, there won't be any visible difference. Otherwise, we would not need to go through all these troubles. Now that we are ready to enter the forest, you should take out that leather parchment." The few people followed his instructions and took the parchment out, while Sir Yanming continued, "Drip some blood at the top of the back of the parchment." Then, he took out a dagger and cut his finger, rubbing his blood on the parchment. Ma Xiangyang, Wen Wenhai and Tan Wen followed suit, and they noticed traces of words appear on the parchment. The words read: walk ten trees straight ahead, walk back six trees, walk left six trees, and walk right eight trees. Sir Yanming then pieced the words from the four parchment together and read out the instructions.

Sir Yanming said, "Alright, everyone should prepare themselves, when we are travelling through the forest, I shall lead from the front, followed by hero Ma and hero Wen, heroine Xue and sect master Shitu will be in the middle, and the Tan brothers at the back. Everyone should put up their guard, move according to how the situation flows and not lose the formation."

The jujube forest in front of them was no longer covered by the darkness of the night. However, the bright rays of sunlight still could not penetrate through the thick canopy, and there was dense mist among the trees, and despite the blowing of the cold winds, the mist did not dissipate.

Sir Yanming took out his dagger and made a mark at the two jujube trees, before carefully treading between the trees, while the rest of the group followed closely behind in formation.

The forest mist was so thick that one could not see more than ten meters ahead, and it was so humid that everyone was wet with perspiration not long after. To pre-empt any danger, everyone had brought out their weapons, and they started to fill the chill pervade their bodies. It has been many years since someone last entered the forest, and the ground was covered in a dense cover of decomposing leaves, thus, walking across the forest floor was energy-consuming, and the jujube trees which were tightly spaced together frequently became an obstacle to the large sized party. Nevertheless, no one dared to cut the trees down in fear of provoking more danger.

Just as everyone was walking in the orderly formation, they heard Shitu Ping's squeal, "Look over there!"

Chapter 14: Dense vegetation

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Dense vegetation

Everyone in the party turned towards the direction of Shitu Ping's surprised gaze, and indeed, about four to five meters away was a skeleton leaning against a jujube tree, its empty sockets looking towards the direction of the party. Everyone felt their hair stood, and they tightened the grip on their weapons.

By rights, Shitu Ping was a woman of the Jianghu, and has encountered her fair share of battles and bloodshed, and should have a wealth of experience of killing, so how could she been frightened off by a mere skeleton? However, given the reputation of the forest, as well as the dense mist which blocked off most vision, coupled with the cold weather made her lose her bearings and shrieked in surprise. Sir Yanming and the party stopped in their tracks, observed their surroundings again, and seeing no movement from the skeleton, they continued in their tracks. Shitu Ping felt embarrassed, but no one blamed her because they knew that it was easy to lose control of their emotions in such an uncertain environment, and thus could sympathize with her.

As they continued to walk in formation deeper into the forest, they gradually began to see more skeletons, some even obstructed their path, but everyone did not dare to circumvent from their path and instead chose to walk straight though. There were many human skeletons, but most of the remains belonged to different types of animals. There must have been many animals in the mountains which had accidentally ventured into this mysterious danger zone, lost their path and never came out. Thinking of these unfortunate beings, the expedition party was conscious of being more careful, and they have long dispelled any notions of adventuring by themselves. After all, these people were handpicked by the respective faction elders, and their hearts that are stronger than most. Thus would not risk their lives to fulfill their own curiosity.

The forest seemed never ending, and even after walking for half a day, there were still no changes to the scenery, and if not for the appearance of more skeletons, everyone would have thought that they have gotten lost. Fortunately, they have not met with any incidents on their path so far, so they have calmed their nerves, while wishing to head on faster and leave the forest earlier.

After walking for a long time with their guards up, Shitu Ping who was in the middle and had the luxury of being less alert started to wonder if the people around here were getting mentally tired. Fierce tiger sect had laid its foundations in Lu town, and five claw peak was within the boundaries of their influence. Even though they were fearful of this restricted area, now that she has experienced it personally, wouldn't it be like their own personal backyard in the future? However, the four factions who were represented by the people around her were much more powerful, would they have any interests in this forest? What if she is abandoned after outliving her usefulness? Her life could even be forfeited then.

Just as Shitu Ping was running these thoughts through her head, her foot suddenly got caught on a tree root and she fell towards her right, and coincidentally at this moment, they were approaching the outer perimeter of two trees, Shitu Ping felt her body lost its balance and threw a kick into the air to keep her body upright, thus landing steadily back onto the ground. However, the area she landed on was already out of the perimeter of the two trees, and she jumped up a branch and stood beside its trunk, looking ahead. Seeing the sudden turn of the events, Sir Yanming, Ma Xiangyang and Wen Wenhai all turned their bodies towards Shitu Ping, and as Ma Xiangyang stared at the tree root on the ground, his eyes turned bitter. Everyone was waiting for Shitu Ping to get down from the tree, but then, something unexpected occurred. Shitu Ping turned three hundred and sixty degrees, and as her eyes glazed past the rest of the party, she ignored them as if they were not there. An expression of horror appeared on her face, as she looked around frantically, raising her feet yet unhesitant to move from her spot. Her mouth was opened as if she was shouting to get their attention, but none of the party could hear any sound. Observing the situation, Sir Yanming used the voice transmission technique on Shitu Ping, and asked "Can you hear me? Nod if you do." At his moment, an expression of unbridled joy appeared on Shitu Ping's face, and she nodded like a chick pecking

furiously on a floor of grains. Sir Yanming continued to transmit “Turn left and stop until I tell you to.” Shitu Ping nodded again, and followed Sir Yanming’s directions which led her to walk towards the party. After four to five steps, at the spot where the two trees meet, Shitu Ping’s eyes brightened, because she finally found her way back to the party.

Sir Yanming did not inquire on the reason of her fall, but rather, he asked “What did you see earlier?” Shitu Ping answered with hesitation “When I stood up, I still saw a forest of jujube trees, but I lost sight of you, and there was no reply when I shouted. If you had not spoken to me, I would have walked around to look for everyone instead.

Sir Yanming wrinkled his brows in deep thought, while Ma Xiangyang smiled towards Shitu Ping “Assistant head Shitu should be careful when she walks in the future. One slip could lead to the loss of life, and the business in Lu town would have to be passed over to someone else. So please take care.” Shitu Ping lowered her head and said “Gentleman Ma, I understand. I will be more careful from now on.”

For the remainder of the route, everyone kept their vigilance even higher, knowing that the forest was not as peaceful as it appears to be. With a moment of carelessness, one could land himself in a life-threatening situation, and lose their life at this very forest. Shitu Ping was unaware, but everyone else knew that shouting was ineffective, and only the voice transmission technique could be used to communicate, except that not anybody would be able to perform the technique, and rather than to rely on your comrades, it was better to be careful in the first place.

After walking for about four to five incense stick worth of time, the number of skeletons gradually decreased, and the mystical fog also thinned, as they approached the perimeter of the forest. Indeed, not long after, they could see sunlight, but Sir Yunming continued to lead the party towards the exit as instructed without lightening up his guard. There was no further accident, and the line of people finally crossed the last tree and walked out of the forest safely. What welcomed them was a sight that left them dazed.

In front of them was a field in the bloom of spring; the field was not large, but there was a lake in the middle, and white steam was surrounding the lake. There

was also a house cut from stone by the lake, and the areas around the house were fields of vegetation, although they could not see the details from afar.

Under the leadership of Sir Yanming, they walked across this patch of land where no one has crossed in a few hundred years.

Sir Yanming then told everyone “According to the booklet, there is no more danger after we entered the secret area, so everyone can lower their guard. However, just to be safe, I propose that we stick together, so I would prefer if you all followed me.” After finishing his sentence, he led the way towards the lake.

When everyone reached the lakeside, a hot rush of air gushed over, and many bubbles were visible on the surface of the lake. Sir Yanming stooped down and took a piece of tree branch and let it into the lake. Seeing no reaction, and wondering how to test the temperature of the lake, he walked up and took out an egg from his breast, smiling “I like eating raw eggs, but there were some leftovers from yesterday. This would be suitable to test the temperature of the water.” Then, he took a piece of cloth and wrapped the egg in it, put it into the lake before taking it out soon after, and as expected, it was already fully cooked. Thus, everyone threw out the idea of exploring within the lake.

It seemed that the unusually warm weather here has something to do with this lake.

Everyone walked along the side of the lake towards the stone house, as they all thought that the precious treasures should be inside. After walking half of the lake’s circumference and not encountering any event or danger, everyone started to calm down as the booklet appeared to be accurate.

There were medicinal fields surrounding the stone house, most of the herbs were unrecognizable because none were specialized in medicine, but they could still pick up the more renowned type of herbs such as Tianqi, gingseng, Baimu, golden sunflower, etc..... Although these herbs are not uncommon in the outside world, the secret area has been left alone for at least three hundred years, so the value of the herbs must have risen with their age. Not to mention those nameless pills, they were probably consumed many years ago. Just based on the value of this medicinal field, it was already worth their effort to come.

Thus, everyone looked blankly at the precious herbs before them, as they thought of how they could bring them back with them. Sir Yanming wrinkled his brows and said to everyone “I did not expect there to be such valuable herbs here, this is truly out of my expectations. Since we are not sure on how to transport them out, let us head towards the stone house for now. After we are done, we can then think of an idea to overcome this obstacle. We do not have to be worried, since these herbs do not have legs or wings to escape.” Everyone chuckled as they followed Sir Yanming into the house.

The house was ordinary, and so simple in design that it did not have a front door. Sir Yanming walked to the entrance, not daring to enter despite the booklet writing that there was no longer any danger within this secret area. Pondering for a moment, he picked up a stone and threw it inside, strained his ears but he could only hear the plop sound of the stone landing on the floor. Only then did Sir Yanming enter, with his hands holding on to his dagger, while the rest followed him inside.

The stone house looked small from the outside, but when they entered, they realized that there was quite a lot of floorspace, similar to hall and not like a normal living quarter which they expected. The floor was not dusty from centuries of neglect; rather, it was clean because the wind could blow through the doorless entrance to sweep up the particles.

The hall was facing smooth blank wall, but it felt as though there should be something hanging on the wall or any other object. There was a square table and a shelf. On the shelf was an incense burner, and further from the burner were many small boxes, and on the table below the shelf were four rectangular silver boxes with antique designs. There were three tables on two sides of the table which were untidily placed, and there were even futons on each chair. There was nothing on the wall at the left but a hole, which should have served as a window, whereas there were three hangings on the right wall. The first picture was of a brocaded robed man holding a sword rushing forward; the second was of a scholar with a sword around his waist walking; and the last was a lady with white powder on her face, a whip in her hands as she stands on the side of a bridge.

The three pictures have faded with age, so their details could not really be mapped out, and there were no traces of words to explain the pictures, so no

one could tell if either of the pictures were of the single armed swordsman.

Chapter 15: Treasure

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Treasure

After searching the entire hall, everyone set their sights on the four silver boxes on the table and the flat box on the shelf. They were clear in their hearts that the purpose of the expedition was to obtain those treasures that were currently in front of them.

However, they still had some misgivings in their heart, because of how coincidental the situation turned out to be. They were four silver boxes, which was the same number of factions they represented. If one party had gone missing in the forest, would there be one less box on the table? After deliberating for a while, they felt that it was unlikely, because these boxes have been at the same position for at least three hundred years, why would they appear or disappear without any reason?

Sir Yanming continued his cautious streak; he did not choose to open the box immediately when he reached the table. Rather, he searched left and right, then took his dagger and knocked on the chairs, and even flicked the futons off, before pointing his dagger at the position of the boxes. Despite having not observed any movements, he was still unsettled and walked over to the wall on the right to pull off the three paintings, but he still could not discover any traps. Then, he walked up to the front of the table, and faced everyone “There do not seem to be any traps around. What do you guys think?”

The rest of the party had been following Sir Yanming’s lead throughout the expedition, and since entering the hall, they did not dare to move from their position. There was a well-known story in Jianghu, which turned into a myth in their generation, that there exist some formations experts who could set up traps with just some pieces of bamboos and stones. Add that to the fact that the whole jujube forest was a large scale formation, what is not to say that a

formation expert has come to this area hundreds of years ago? They had been frightened since the beginning, and already chose to obey their elders' instructions to follow Sir Yanming. Now that the latter had asked for their opinions, what else could they do? Thus, they nodded their heads in agreement.

Sir Yanming was pleased with their attitudes, and laughed "Jianghu is an unpredictable place, it is better to be cautious. Why don't you all look around to find any other traps in this hall, if you were fated to encounter any benefits, then it shall be yours to keep."

The rest of the party turned and looked at each other before scattering around the hall to search for clues. In their hearts, they had some suspicions; would this Sir Yanming have any selfish intentions? Would he switch the boxes? However, the hall was spacious enough for everyone's actions to be visible, so they were not afraid of anyone making any sneak attempts. Perhaps this elder truly was concerned for the safety for the younger generation, and there was also no loss on their part to be more careful.

After seeing everyone returned from their investigation, Sir Yanming cleared his throat and said "Following our earlier agreement, each faction shall claim a box for themselves. Even though Shitu Ping belongs to the fierce tiger sect, but she can be counted as part of hero Ma's team and not as a separate faction. Does assistant sect head Shitu have any objections to this?"

Shitu Ping replied calmly "I do not."

Indeed, how would she dare to object, her life was saved by the rest just now.

Sir Yanming continued "Then, we shall follow the position of the map parchments, starting from left to right and top to bottom, each of us will take a box, and whatever we managed to obtain will be left to fate." Saying which, he stood to the side of the table.

As per order, the first to take a box should have been Sir Yanming. Wen Wenhai deliberated, and then walked up front. He carefully observed the four identical boxes, and having spotted no differences and a layer of dust above, he pondered and then took the second box from the left. Just as he was about to open the box, Sir Yanming stopped him and said "There must be some treasures in the boxes. Since there are exactly four boxes, one for each person, everyone

should take one box as a reward for their accomplishment. If the boxes contain different items, then we may not be able to avoid some conflict, so what do everyone say if we were to keep the contents of the boxes a mystery for now?”

Everyone nodded in approval, so Wen Wenhai kept the box in his breast and went back to his original position.

The next person was thousand swords peak’s Ma Xiangyang, followed by Sir Yanming, the last being Tan Wu who simply took up the last box. Nobody opened their box and kept them in their breast instead.

After the distribution, everyone’s sights landed on the flat box on the shelf.

Sir Yanming walked to the far end of the shelf to pick up the box, and felt it while a puzzled look spread across his face. From his observation, it felt as if the box was carved of stone, and the box was meant to store treasures, yet he could not guess why it was not on the table and left on the shelf instead.

Sir Yanming carried the box and walked over to the table, showing the box to everyone before placing it on the table and looking at everyone’s reactions. Then, he said “The only object left in the house is this box, but we cannot share it equally. Shall we use the method we discussed before, to play scissors paper stone to decide its owner?”

Everyone looked at each other, their hearts feeling surprised. As members of Jianghu, they were going to follow such a childish method to decide such an important matter. However, towards such a precious treasure, everyone will be willing to fight through their teeth, and who knows if the fisherman would gain in the fight between the clam and stork? Hence, they were not willing to take the risk to fight.

Just as everyone decided in their hearts to follow their previous agreement, Ma Xiangyang said to Sir Yanming “Elder, I have a suggestion.”

Sir Yanming looked surprised as he said “Hero Ma, please share it with us.”

Ma Xiangyang continued “I am agreeable with playing scissors paper stone to determine the owner, but I have a small request, which is for no matter whom to win to open the box for us to see its contents. What does everybody think of this proposal?”

Sir Yanming pondered, and nodded in acknowledgement. The other people were also feeling the same way in their hearts; while they could bring back their own silver box to check its contents, they may not be the eventual owner of the flat box, and thus would want to take a good look at whatever they were missing out on.

Then, Sir Yanming arranged the order for the people to play the fist game, and eventually, it followed the same order as when they chose their silver box, with Piaomiao and thousand swords peak playing together, and Sir Yanming and the Tan family in the second game.

Piaomiao's sect Wen Wenhai glanced at Xue Qing and nodded towards her. An encouraging smile appeared on his face, but it was coupled with a tinge of embarrassment. Xue Qing then walked up to the side of the table, because she knew the reason for her senior brother's embarrassment; he has lost every scissors paper stone game no matter who he was played with.

Thousand swords peak only had one representative, so Ma Xiangyang walked up and stood aside Xue Qing. Naturally, he was reluctant to let Shitu Ping play, and even if he was willing, Shitu Ping would not have dared to do so.

Seeing the two people walked forward, Sir Yanming said "The rules should be familiar to you all: Scissors beats paper, paper beats stone, and stone beats scissors. Before we begin, I will require the players to blindfold themselves, and wait for my count before they show their hand. Only after then will the player be allowed to take off his blindfold to check the results."

In the first match between Xue Qing and Ma Xiangyang, they both threw out scissors, but in the second round, Xue Qing threw out scissors while Ma Xiangyang threw out paper. Thus, when Ma Xiangyang took off his blindfold, a dejected expression formed over his face.

The match between Sir Yanming and Tan Wen only lasted a round, with Sir Yanming triumphing with stone.

The last match was also the most important game, and this time, sir Yanming was in deep though as the two players blindfolded themselves. On Ma Xiangyang's count, they both threw out scissors in the first game. Seeing the tie, both players blindfolded themselves again, and when they realized that they tied

with scissors again, Sir Yanming became frantic. In fact, Sir Yanming had his own ulterior motives when he chose the game; he had always been good in these types of guessing games that require outwitting the opponent. However, at this moment, he realized that his opponent was also an expert, and his heart grew even more frantic. Unfortunately, in the third round, he threw out paper while Xue Qing stuck with her choice and won the match.

Needless to say, Xue Qing was overjoyed, and as Wen Wenhai took the box to open, Sir Yanming stopped him and said “Hold on, just to be cautious, use your sword and open it from afar.” Wen Wenhai followed the elder’s advice and placed the box onto the table, before using his sword to pry it from afar. However, he was unable to find the lid of the box, and when he picked it up again, he realized that the box was sealed. He then tried to break it off using his strength, and everyone else tried after he failed. Sir Yanming even ignored the look of Wen Wenhai’s face as he used his dagger to stab the box, but the dagger did not even leave a mark.

It finally dawned on him why the previous occupant left the box aside at the far end of the shelf.

Then, Sir Yanming casually returned the box to Wen Wenhai who carefully put it into his breast.

Seeing that there was no more objects in the house, everyone’s thoughts returned to the medicinal fields outside. Sir Yanming led the party out, and said “We did not prepare sufficiently and hence are unable to transport all the herbs here. I suggest that we harvest the matured herbs now and split them into four portions, with each faction taking one portion, and as for the herb sprouts, we can leave them here while our factions re-discuss their distribution. What do you all think?”

No one had any objection, so under Sir Yanming’s direction, the medicinal fields were harvested one after another, and the herbs were then split into four portions and placed into four cloth bags for each of the faction.

Finally, Sir Yanming said “Since none of us had any fortunate encounter, we can only console ourselves with these herbs. Those herbs in the cloth bags are meant for our factions to use, whereas for now, we can each pick three mature

herbs for ourselves.”

Saying which, Sir Yanming led the party to walk across the fields again, and because none were well-versed with medicine, they all picked out some stalks of the more renowned herbs like ginseng, Tianqi, et cetera.

After they were done, the sunlight appeared to fade slightly, which probably signaled that midday has passed. Everyone then thought of leaving this secret area, and since they took a long while to reach this place, wouldn't it be dark by the time they finally leave? Sir Yanming smiled “To leave this place, we can casually choose a route and keep walking on in the same direction. However, from the sky, I estimate that night is coming soon so we should better leave immediately.”

Thus, everyone packed their belongings, and they then followed behind Sir Yanming and walked past the two jujube trees and left the secret area.

Unknown to the party, just as they left the secret area, a snake like beast head emerged from the hot spring lake and looked towards their direction, before submerging back into the water.

Chapter 16: Check up

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Check up

While the party was leaving the jujube forest, the sky has begun to darken. Fortunately, the return trip was uneventful, and by the time they left, whether it was the experienced Sir Yanming or the younger generation disciples, they all heaved in relief as this “co-operative” expedition has finally come to a close. They have managed to keep their lives, and the mission could be said to be complete as the treasures are now in their hands.

Sir Yanming smiled at the party and said “Young heroes, it is better to be patient and wait until we reached the thumb of the five claw peak before we discuss anything else in detail.” Then, he brought the party back to their previous meeting location.

As everyone sat surrounding the ox-sized rock, Sir Yanming began to speak “Young heroes, this expedition is finally complete. Next, I would impose on you all to bring the fruits of this expedition back to your respective faction, and at the same time send my greetings to your elders. Pass on my invite for a meetup at our usual place on the second day of February so we can enjoy some good wine and good company again.”

After finishing his sentence, he used his qinggong and left immediately, as though he did not want to stay in the vicinity as longer.

The rest of the party looked at each other, exchanged nods, and then, the Tan brothers took their leave in their unique synchronized fashion. They were followed by Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing who cupped their hands towards Ma Xiangyang and Shitu Ping before they left. Suddenly, as though a thought has suddenly struck his mind, Wen Wenhai stopped and turned towards Shitu Ping and said “Sect head Shitu, , we passed by Lu town two days ago and intervened

in a minor matter to save a village family. We wish to apologize in advance if we had caused any inconvenience then.” Shitu Ping was also a quick-witted person, and she immediately replied “My sect member had lost his bearings in front of you two, I hope that you do not mind. If you ever encounter a similar matter in the future, please do not hesitate to intervene and help my sect maintain our reputation.” Wen Wenhai smiled as he said “Of course, of course. May we meet in the future.” Then, the two disciples followed their original route and left quickly.

In a blink of an eye, there were only two people left at the ox-sized rock. Shitu Ping began to feel unease, but fortunately, Ma Xiangyang broke the silence and said “Shitu sect head, I will not elaborate further on the other matters, but since you are aware and even participated in this expedition, I would like to invite you back to thousand swords peak as a guest for a period of time, so that my sect master can decide on how to proceed from here.”

Shitu Ping nodded “As per your instructions.” Then, she followed Ma Xiangyang back through the route which they came from.

Soon, the ox-sized rock was still again.

Just as the Jianghu people were returning back to their respective factions, Zhang Xiaohua and butcher Liu were hurrying back to Guo village.

Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue were sitting in the house while helping Guo Sufei with some embroidery. When butcher Liu approached, Liu Yueyue coincidentally raised her head to look outside, and her vision went past the short wall surrounding the Zhang family courtyard to the familiar figure. Unable to control herself, Liu Yueyue broke down into tears as she ran out of the house and jumped into butcher Liu’s embrace. “Father ” Her tears were falling continuously like pearls on a plate, while butcher Liu hugged his daughter and patted her back tenderly, his own eyes turning red as well. As his intention was to let his daughter go out to town to enjoy the New Year’s festivities, he would never imagine that such an unfortunate event would befall on her, giving her such a huge trauma. Liu Qing who followed behind was also crying; she could not remain calm having finally seen a loved one.

Zhang Cai also went out of the house in his clutches to invite butcher Liu in.

With the arrival of so many people, the Zhang family house was crowded, but fortunately, the fellow villager politely excused himself and went back home.

Zhang Xiaohua also visited his brother the moment he reached home. Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu's injuries were much more severe than his as they were with their father trying to fend off the goons so that Zhang Xiaohua could escape with the ladies. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohu did not suffer any fractures, and was currently lying on the platform conversing with his elder brother. Xiaolong's injuries were about as bad as Xiaohu, but he had also suffered a fracture and had to get his bones reset by the village doctor. Thus, he could not sleep much from the pain last night, and was feeling dull. Seeing Zhang Xiaohua enter, Zhang Xiaohu asked "Has Liu Qing's family arrived?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied "Yeap, they just entered the house."

Zhang Xiaohu asked further "No one else?"

Xiaohua was puzzled "Who else?"

Xiaohu replied "A matchmaker!"

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head like a recently converted monk.

Zhang Xiaolong smiled from his side of the platform "Ignore second brother's nonsense."

Zhang Xiaohua immediately understood the joke, and replied with good humor "You will have to wait a while longer, the matchmaker will not arrive today because it takes time to prepare the betrothal gifts. After all, the other family would want to express their gratitude properly since eldest brother risked his life to stand up against twenty plus goons. The heavens were moved, and thus, eldest brother's heroic behavior has captured elder sister Liu Qing's heart, and she is now willing to sacrifice anything for her undying love."

Then it was Zhang Xiaohu's turn to be confused "Why would the heavens be moved?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied "If true love exists in this world, then wasn't eldest brother's love sincere enough to move the heavens?"

Zhang Xiaohu retorted "Why are you acting like some educated scholar,

Dowry, that is called a dowry. Furthermore, Liu Qing's father is a teacher, this future sister-in-law of ours would have read thousands of books before, once eldest brother become influenced, wouldn't he be more educated than you?"

Zhang Xiaolong's face was marked with embarrassment, and he admonished Zhang Xiaohua "You little rascal, what do you know? Stop following second brother's trash-talk, you will implicate Liu Qing if someone else hears you."

Just at that moment, someone walked into the room, and a crispy hoarse voice sounded "Who is talking about my elder sister? Who is taking advantage of her? I could overhear some parts of your conversation."

The three brothers raised their heads, it appeared that Liu Yueyue had brought butcher Liu to see them.

The smile on butcher Liu's face was obvious as he looked at them. Liu Yueyue also had a playful smile on her face, while Liu Qing was standing behind red in embarrassment as she lowered her head. Zhang Cai who was guiding them as the master of the household was far behind and could not overhear their conversation.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw them enter, he immediately jumped off the platform and was about to tidy some space for butcher Liu to sit, when Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue swiftly tidied some space in front of them and helped butcher Liu sit down. Evidently, during the day when Zhang Xiaohua was not around, the two ladies have cleaned up the place more than once, which led him to think in his heart "Today, was it the two elder sisters who fed eldest and second brother their lunch?"

Seeing a group of people suddenly enter, Zhang Xiaolong's face also turned red as though he had a guilty conscience. Zhang Xiaohu picked his body up, and just as he was about to get off the platform, butcher Liu took his hand and said gently "This boy is still recovering from his injuries, he should not move about too much." Zhang Xiaohu struggled a little but was unable to break his grip, and thus had to lie back down obediently. When Zhang Xiaohua saw the "kindness" in his face, he felt disgruntled. As for Zhang Xiaolong, while he had the intention to sit up, it was more inconvenient for him due to his arm. Seeing Zhang Xiaolong tried and failed to get up, Liu Qing hesitated for a moment before moving over to

support him by his shoulders. When the two exchanged gazes, electricity flew between their eyes and their faces flushed even redder.

When butcher Liu saw the scene, a smile blossomed like a flower over his face, as he said to Zhang Xiaolong “This boy sure has a righteous heart, to be able to stand up to the bully and save my daughter and niece, this old Liu owes you a bow.” After finishing his sentence, he got off the platform and attempted a deep bow towards Zhang Xiaolong. Zhang Xiaolong became flustered and extended his uninjured hand over, saying “Please do not act this way, uncle. That was already something I should have done. Aren’t you reducing my life by bowing to someone of a younger generation? Xiaohua, quickly stop uncle.” Zhang Xiaohua then took the opportunity to get up, and as Zhang Xiaohua tried to stop butcher Liu, but how could he match up the larger and stronger man, thus the latter completed his bow. This led Zhang Xiaolong to feel out of place, and he turned towards Liu Qing to beg for advice, but both Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue were unsure as well.

Zhang Cai then said “Children’s elder, please do not be so courteous. Young people are naturally hot blooded, weren’t we the same during our youths? There is no need to be so formal, and the injuries my children incurred are not too serious, they will get better soon enough. Instead, why don’t the two of us go out and have a chat over some wine?”

Upon hearing his words, butcher Liu smiled and said “Heroes only emerge from youths, and we have already grown so old. Alright, I shall leave you youngsters alone, us old people will go drink our wine.”

Then, he turned and return to the communal room, with Zhang Cai following behind, leaving Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue with the Zhang brothers in the small room.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at Liu Qing’s face which was as scarlet as cherry blossoms, and Liu Yueyue’s eyes which were darting about, and could feel the awkward atmosphere, so he said immediately “Elder sister Liu Qing, you look really pretty today. I shall let you guys talk, while I go out to play.” Then, he left the room in a flash.

The relationships between a man and woman is indeed strange, when Zhang

Xiaolong first met Liu Qing at the cloth store, their fate would have ended if the bully did not appear, and these couple would not have met a second time. The events in town Lu displayed Zhang Xiaolong's hot bloodedness, which left a deep impression on Liu Qing. Through this current short period of interaction, and under the deliberate fanning of flames by some outsiders, Liu Qing did begin to feel some attraction towards the young man growing in her heart. She thought that if there was such a man who would protect her with his own life, then perhaps he was sent by the heavens to her. When she took a second look at Zhang Xiaolong's weather beaten face, it radiated a sense of masculinity which she did not see in her elder brother, and her heart began to feel foreign to her.

Butcher Liu naturally stayed over in the Zhang family house to pass the night.

On the morning of the second day, Zhang Cai accompanied butcher Liu to chat about farm work while Guo Sufei accompanied Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue to nurse the two injured brothers, as well as to do some housework. The two ladies seemed to know many tips for housekeeping that she was not aware of. For example, Liu Qing helped place some pots of plants in the common area and Zhang Xiaolong's room, thus brightening up the house.

This is truly a good daughter-in-law... candidate~

Chapter 17: Expressing gratitude

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Expressing gratitude

By the time Liu Qing's father and elder brother reached the Zhang family house, it was already three poles after morning.

Butcher Liu was sitting at the courtyard having an idle chat with Zhang Cai, and the walls around Zhang Cai's courtyard was also low, so from afar, butcher Liu could already spot teacher Liu and Liu Kai being guided along by a fellow villager towards the house. The two visitors were dressed in new clothes, and Liu was also carrying a large gift box while walking behind his father.

Butcher Liu got up quickly, informed Zhang Cai of the visitors' arrival, then went out to welcome his elder brother. Zhang Cai rushed into the house shouting "Children's mother, Liu Qing's father has arrived"

When Liu Qing heard his voice, she did not throw her thread and needle down to rush out like Liu Yueyue, but rather, put down the halfway-completed embroidery in her hands and waited for Guo Sufei to leave before following behind.

When Liu Qing's father entered the courtyard, butcher Liu and Liu Yueyue were already at the entrance to embrace their own father and brother. At that moment, Zhang Cai clutched his walking stick and went over to offer his welcome, and after a round of greetings, when Liu Qing then walked over to her father and brother to offer her own greetings, teacher Liu grabbed his daughter's hands and observe her from head to toe, and felt relief wash over his heart when he saw a smile on the otherwise unblemished familiar face, without any worries or fears in her face, apart from some redness in her eyes. He patted on her shoulders and said "You have suffered, my child."

Liu Qing wiped off the tears in her eyes and smiled "Daughter is fine. Thanks to

elder brother Xiaolong and his family's help, we managed to escape the lion's den."

Teacher Liu signaled Liu Kai to bring the gift box over, and faced Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei, saying "Words cannot express our feelings of gratitude to you, these are just something small which I prepared out of courtesy, I hope benefactor will accept them."

Zhang Cai quickly insisted that they take back the gifts, saying courteously "We just happened to be there, did not actually contribute much. In the end, it was someone else who saved both them and us."

Teacher Liu persisted handing over the gifts, and said "We are still grateful to you. If you had not intervened, our children would already have been assaulted, and those two heroes would not have noticed them."

Butcher Liu saw that the two men were moving back and forth and going nowhere, so he extended his hand and took the gift saying "You all do not have to stand on the ceremony. Old brother Zhang, this is a small token of appreciation from my own elder brother, so you do not have to reject it." After saying his words, he carried the gift box into the house.

Teacher Liu smiled as he said to Zhang Cai "This second brother of mine would just do things his way without consideration for others. I hope you are not offended."

Zhang Cai smiled back and replied "Of course not, your little brother and I have many things in common. This way please, let us continue this conversation in the house."

Zhang Cai then brought teacher Liu into the house, but the house was small and there were not enough chairs, so everyone casually found a place to sit.

After teacher Liu was seated, he expressed his gratitude towards the Zhang family members again, and then he took out some silvers from his breast and put it on the little table, saying "Old brother Zhang, the injuries that your family members incurred were due to saving our daughters from harms' way, and we are therefore responsible. These silvers are for you to seek treatment, our households do not have deep pockets so we could only bring out these much, I hope for your understanding."

This time, Zhang Cai was insistent on not accepting the money. He said “I believe Xiaohua has already relayed the events of that day. The bullies have already provided compensation on the spot, but we were afraid that they would demand it back so we did not dare to use it. However, our benefactor hero Wen has also given us quite a sum of money, which were enough to seek treatment and purchase medicine, so we will not accept your money no matter what.” Liu Kai who was sitting by the side replied “Uncle Zhang, a good deed deserves another in return. This silvers ought to be given to you. How could we stand by the side and do nothing for our benefactors who got injured while saving the girls? Wouldn’t that be illogical?” Butcher Liu also shook his head “Old brother Zhang, you should just accept these money. A few days later, I will also bring some money and meat over.”

Zhang Cai then said “Dear brothers, please do not do so. We did not help with the intention of receiving remuneration. Furthermore, we already received the money for our treatment, so we cannot accept your money anymore.”

Thus, the group of people started to push and pull again, and even after some while, Zhang Cai still refused to accept the money.

At that moment, Liu Qing interrupted as she looked at teacher Liu “Father, since uncle Zhang do not wish to accept these silvers, you should keep them for now. I have another suggestion, why don’t you hear it before deciding again?”

Teacher Liu replied “Sure, you always had your smarts since young, what good idea have you thought of this time?”

Liu Qing said “Uncle Zhang’s family got injured while saving us, so the two of us can remain here to take care of them until they fully recover from their injuries. Since three members of the Zhang households are now not able to work, and there is still an elder to look after, Aunt Guo may not be able to handle the burden by herself. Hence, we can chip in some labor to lighten her load and allow this family to function as per normal, and this would also be something that we owe them. What do you think?”

Teacher Liu pondered for a while, then he replied “I have lacked foresight in my judgement, Qing’er’s idea is pretty good. What do you think, second brother?”

Butcher Liu slapped his chest and said “Good idea, good idea. I was also

thinking that way.”

Liu Yueyue nodded silently in agreement.

Thus, the matter was decided that way.

Then, teacher Liu and Liu Kai entered the room, and Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu were still lying on the bed. Earlier when they heard butcher Liu’s booming voice, they both tried to get up but were stopped by Guo Sufei. They could guess that their visitors this time were Liu Qing’s father and elder brother, and both tried to get up again. This time round, Liu Qing did not go forward to support Zhang Xiaolong, rather, Guo Sufei helped her son to sit up on the platform.

Teacher Liu then observed the young man before him carefully. Zhang Xiaolong was a muscular youth, whose age was around Liu Kai, with ordinary looks and thick brows and bright eyes like his father, and while his mouth was still wounded, he could see an air of dependability on him. The clothes he was wearing were not new, and there were some patches, but it was washed clean, with the appearance of being very comfortable. Zhang Xiaolong’s arm was still in his clutches and were bandaged to his chest, but the hands were rough and muscular which suggested his proficiency in farmwork.

As teacher Liu looked at the youth, whose height was about the same as his own son, but disposition was vastly different, he could not help but approve of this young man in his heart. Only someone like that would be able to ignore his own safety to help another in need.

Under the scrutiny of teacher Liu, Zhang Xiaolong’s heart began to palpitate. On seeing the other party’s awkward expression, teacher Liu then broke the silence to express his gratitude, and wished him a speedy recovery, before making some small conversations. Later, as he followed Zhang Cai out of the room, he told the latter “Elder brother Zhang sure is fortunate for having such an outstanding son.”

Zhang Cai beamed when he heard the praise, but he did not forget to stay humble and replied “Same to you, your son is also pretty outstanding himself.”

Seeing that it was midday, Zhang Cai called Guo Sufei to prepare some wine and dishes for teacher Liu. The Zhang household was obviously not as well-off as the Liu family, so the dishes that were prepared for the guests were not anything

special for which Zhang Cai apologized profusely. Nevertheless, teacher Liu and butcher Liu were both not picky, and they helped themselves to their normal fare. Of them Zhang Xiaohua was the happiest among the people dining, because in his mind, he was able to eat meat for two consecutive days, and he wished that such days would come more often.

After the meal, the two Liu brothers made some idle talk with Zhang Cai, before returning to Bali Gou with the two ladies.

Zhang household was thus left with a family of invalids lying on their respective beds.

Fortunately, it was winter season, so even on normal days, the family would huddle at home to keep warm, and not leave the house to pull weeds and farm. However in this afternoon, everyone in the Zhang household felt that there was something lacking, and only when the sky began to darken, Guo Sufei realized as she was preparing dinner that the two helpful additions were not around. The members of the Zhang household also felt strange, they have been living as a family of six for many years, but after the few days when the two ladies stayed over, they actually felt that the house has lost its bustle, and began to miss the days when they were around.

After making dinner casually, Zhang Xiaohua's mother personally helped the two elder sons to finish their meal, and then, everyone sat under the oil lamp, and Guo Sufei asked "I wonder if Liu Qing and the rest have eaten yet?"

Zhang Cai replied "Looking at the sky, they should only just reached home. It is too late for them to prepare dinner, so they are probably dining at butcher Liu's place."

Zhang Xiaohua said "I am sure that is the case. It could even be that they are having five spiced meat as well."

Guo Sufei then said "By the way, Xiaohua, what was their house like when you went over?"

Zhang Xiaohua then describe what he saw and experienced in Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue's homes to the best of his abilities.

Actually, Guo Sufei has been meaning to inquire about the home affairs of Liu

Qing's household, but she felt that it was impolite to ask Liu Qing personally. When she met butcher Liu yesterday, she still felt that the timing was inappropriate, and after seeing the way teacher Liu and Liu Kai carried themselves, she felt a knot in her heart, and after listening to Zhang Xiaohua's account, the knot in her heart grew even tighter, and her brows wrinkled, as she asked Zhang Cai "Old man, do you think Liu Qing is interested in our Xiaolong?"

Everyone kept their silence, but Zhang Xiaolong's face turned a little dark. Zhang Cai replied "This would depend on fate. Whatever we say do not matter, we can only follow heaven's will."

Zhang Xiaohu then said "Mother, I feel that Liu Qing is meticulous, and she should have read many books, so there is no question about her knowledge, and furthermore, she can do housework really well, much better than the impulsive Liu Yueyue. From the way she took care of eldest brother, it seems that she has some interest towards him."

Zhang Xiaohua said "Second brother, when it comes to marriage, the elder sibling must marry before the younger sibling, you do not have to worry. Even if you do not raise the matter of Liu Yueyue, mother will still consider her in her selection of a bride for you."

Zhang Xiaohu's face turned ugly, and he kicked Zhang Xiaohua as he replied "We are talking about eldest brother's marriage matters, stop fooling around, Liu Yueyue and I do not have anything between us."

Zhang Cai then said "My second son, even if you have some interest towards her, we will still have to consider your eldest brother. From our household's financial situation, marrying a bride into the house would already be stretching our budget, so you would have to hold that thought for a while longer."

Guo Sufei then interrupted "Old man, what about those checks..."

Zhang Cai gave her a glare and abruptly cut her words "Do not talk about that, that money still has to be returned."

After a while more, everyone began to feel tired, and not long after, the extinguished the oil lamp and went to their respective beds.

Zhang Xiaolong was tumbling around the entire night, unable to catch any

sleep, although it was uncertain if the reason was due to the pain from his injuries, or from his worries in his heart. Nevertheless, his fumbling around did not affect Zhang Xiaohua and his dreams of bright lights.

Chapter 18: Returning to the sect

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Returning to the sect

Wen Wenhai was feeling very tired, the whip in his hands struck onto the backside of his horse as he tried to urge it move faster. Xue Qing was on his side, her face covered by the veil again, and likewise, she hurried the horse which was carrying her.

Wen Wenhai would occasionally turn around and glance at Xue Qing, while encouraging her on. “Junior sister, just hold it there for a little longer, we will soon reach the territories of our faction, and by then we can take a break again.”

Xue Qing then replied “I know, senior brother. Let’s just hurry.”

After the two people descended from Shiren peak, they initially felt relaxed for completing their mission successfully. They only had to bring the items back to the sect, and were drowning in the happiness from their personal gains of the precious herbs, but after they got on their horses, and when comparing them to the top bred horses which they brought from their sect, they then understood why their master was willing to let them use such precious horses for their trip. At the same time, Wen Wenhai recalled his sect master’s instruction to “come back as quickly as possible.” They then realized that they were in a very vulnerable situation, even if they set aside the possibility that the other three factions had any ulterior intentions, if any normal person in Jianghu had caught wind of their gains or discover the valuables on their bodies, their lives would be in peril. Their hearts were struck with fear as they exchanged glances, got on their horses immediately and sped off.

Thus, the two people did not sleep or rest as they rode day after night. Fortunately, they had trained in martial arts and their bodies were able to handle stress of the journey, otherwise, an ordinary person would have collapsed long

ago.

As the time was approaching noon, and two people were still rushing, and from afar, they noticed a teahouse. This type of teahouse was common in such places where the roads intersect; they were usually covered with wild grass or tentage to serve as a roof, and would often serve simple dishes and tea to travelers who were looking to rest.

As they approached the teahouse, Xue Qing could not help but ask “Senior brother, why don’t we take a break at the teahouse. There is still at least one more mealtime before we reach the boundaries of our Piaomiao sect’s influence, so this place should be safe enough.”

Wen Wenhai was not unmoved by her suggestion, and he slowed his horse as they got closer to the teahouse.

However, Wen Wenhai suddenly changed his mind and smiled towards Xue Qing, saying “Junior sister, since there is only one mealtime worth of journey, then what is this little distance compared to our whole journey so far? It is better to clench out guts and ride out the remaining distance, and once we reached our territories, then we can take a break. What do you think?”

Xue Qing replied “Sure, senior brother. We shall not fail our mission and waste all the efforts so far just to rest at the last moment. Let us hurry on.”

After their conversation, both of them regained back their energy and increase their pace, and while ignoring the sweat on their horses, they soon passed by the teahouse leaving a trail of dust behind.

There were not many people at the teahouse at that moment. Seated at the table closest to the road were two unordinary fellows. One had a pale face and long white hair which was fluttering in the wind, his hand carried a sword, while the other had dark skin and muscularly built, with long limbs, and was unarmed. The two men were playing with the worn cup, and they could see the actions clearly when Wen Wenhai slowed his horse as he approached the teahouse but sped off soon after.

As Wen Wenhai’s horse left them in the dust, the sword bearing hero turned towards the dark skinned hero and smile “Old sixth, stop drinking, they have already left. I did not expect that that little Hai would be so careful to choose not

to stop at this teahouse, Old third has indeed picked up a good disciple.”

The Old sixth responded “Indeed, old fourth. None of our own disciples are as good at judging a situation as him. A pity that his talent is limited, so it is difficult for him to advance in his martial skills, if not, his future will be unbounded. Sigh, I pity those two horses.”

After conversing, the two men left some money on the table and saddled their horse, before getting on to chase after the two people in front.

However, they did notice that behind them, dressed as an ordinary passerby, was someone whose eyes were constantly observing his surroundings. When they left, this mysterious person thought in his heart “I wonder what has happened for two of the six tigers in Piaomiao sect to personally show their faces?”

Then, he settled his bill and secretly followed the people ahead.

After sprinting for meal’s worth of effort, Wen Wenhai noted that there more people in his surroundings, and more stores alongside the road, and finally, the city of Pingyang appeared in the backdrop. Suddenly, the horse he was riding emitted a slurring sound, before its legs turned weak and fell slowly onto the floor. Wen Wenhai felt his body descending, so he slapped his hand on the horseback and used the momentum to jump off the horse. Then, the horse automatically fell onto the ground, while spit begin to foam around its mouth, and its eyes began to close, as though it was slowly dying from the fatigue. Seeing the scene in front of her, Xue Qing preemptively pulled the reins on her horse, and slowly let her horse come to a rest. There was also foam appearing on the mouth of her horse, and it seemed not much better off from its comrade.

Wen Wenhai stood by the road as he watched his horse which sprayed on the side of the road, as well as the surrounding passers-by who hurried left the scene, pondered for a moment. Then, he took out a signaling arrow, and “swoosh” he sent it into the sky where it exploded with a bang, the noise travelling far and wide.

Just as he shot the arrow into the sky, he heard people from the back calling “Little hai~” Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing turned their heads, and joy appeared on their faces.

They were the two fellows who were earlier at the teahouse.

The two men rode their horses to the front, while Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing immediately responded with a greeting “We greet fourth senior uncle and sixth senior uncle.”

The two men got off their horses, and laughed “These two disciples do not have to stand on the ceremony. We were under the instruction of the sect master to welcome you. Wait for a moment, he should be arriving himself in a while.”

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing nodded their heads in understanding, and then stood beside their senior uncles, waiting quietly.

At this moment, the hearts of the two finally calmed down.

Indeed, not long after, the figures of a group of people riding on horses appeared from afar. At the head of the party was a scholar in a head scarf, aged about forty years old, with no facial hair, wearing white robes, bearing a youthful appearance not unlike a scholar. Following closely behind was an attractive woman who was simply dressed. The two were riding on white horses and being followed by ten plus men. These men were obviously martial experts, from their fitted clothing to the swords in their hands, while some even raised their heads proudly and gazed intensely at the surroundings.

When the party finally arrived, the couple got off their horses with a flip, while Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing walked up to them and said “We pay our respect to the sect master.”

This scholar-like person was actually Piaomiao sect’s sect master, Ou Peng!

Then, the two faced towards the attractive woman and bowed “We pay our respect to sect master wife.”

The attractive woman smiled silently as she looked at them, while Ou Peng said “Good job Little hai, good job Qing’er. Both of you have worked hard, so there is no need to be so courteous. You know that your sect master’s wife would rarely involve herself in the matters of the sect, but she has come today specially for you.”

The two men behind Wen Wenhai also walked up front to pay their respect

“Greetings sect master, greets sister.”

Ou Peng extended his hands to raise them up, saying “You have also worked hard.”

The fourth senior uncle replied “Not at all, we only went out to sample some tea. Your disciple was so cautious that he skipped over us without entering the teahouse.”

Wen Wenhai then understood the situation, and quickly said “This disciple did not know that senior uncle was waiting for us. If not, I would have chosen to set off with senior uncle instead.”

Then, he turned towards the sect master and said “Disciple and junior sister are back safe and sound, but this horse...”

Ou Peng laughed heartily and said “Not a problem. No matter how good a horse is, it will not be as important to the sect as the two of you. There is nothing else more important than you two coming back safely.”

Then, he said to the people at his back “Leave a horse for Qing’er, then tidy up this area.”

Saying which, he took Wen Wenhai, Xue Qing, and the two senior uncles on horseback and returned, leaving behind his men to clean up the dead horses, and without any mention on the article in Wen Wenhai’s possession.

The ordinary looking customer who followed the group of four from the teahouse was even more shocked when he saw the procession, and without much consideration, he flipped off his horse and sped to another direction. Evidently, he was rushing back to his sect to report his findings, since a matter that caused sect master Ou Peng to personally appear would definitely not be a trifling matter.

Wen Wenhai and the rest followed the party towards Pingyang city, and when they reached, instead of entering through the city gate, they bypassed the gate towards another direction, and after the time taken to boil a kettle of tea, they reached a mountain villa outside of the city.

The villa was built while following the gradient of the mountain and there were several holdings of different sizes and heights scattered in front of it. There were

many people going about their own work, and when they saw the approaching brigade, everyone parted to create a large way for the brigade to cross, while bowing respectfully to the people on horseback.

Further into the mountains was a long straight road, with massive trees planted on the side. After crossing the road, they reached a grand archway, with the words “Piaomiao” written artistically on a signboard at its entrance, not unlike the plaque that Xue Qing has given to the Zhang household.

Crossing the archway, they arrived at a tower. There were already dozens of disciples waiting on the steps that led to the tower door, as well as a fair-skinned, elegant dispositioned youth around the age of Wen Wenhai at the front of the disciples. This man was precisely senior brother Zhang Chengyue, who was waiting for Ou Peng return. When the arriving party dismounted, Zhang Chengyue led the other disciples as they roared in unison “Welcome back sect master.”

After Ou Peng dismounted, some attendants naturally took over the reins of his horse and led it away. Ou Peng then said “Good, everyone has done well, Now return to your respective positions. Disciples who are participating in the inner competition should also grasp your remaining time left to practice.”

The crowd of disciples replied “Yes, sect master.”

Then, the men who were following behind Ou Peng entered the tower, while the other sect disciples returned to their respective chores. This group of disciples were assembled several days ago as per sect master’s orders, and they thought that something major was happening, but unexpectedly, after the sect master came back from his short trip today, he announced the anticlimactic end of the high alert. Even though the disciples were confused, this was a mission by the sect and had to be prioritized over their personal training for the upcoming inner competition. If they could achieve a high placement in this completion, their standing and reputation in the sect would soar, and perhaps they will be given access to the more profound martial arts. This was the main thoughts of all the disciples, so they did not bother to question the day’s event.

As Ou Peng led the group into the discussion hall, Ou Peng’s wife excused herself and returned to her place while the rest of the party entered the hall.

Chapter 19: Pill

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Pill

The discussion hall was a very large auditorium, there were many chairs arranged neatly inside, and it was where the upper echelons of the sect would congregate to discuss important matters.

Today, there were not many people in the discussion hall, but the atmosphere was especially solemn.

Even though Ou Peng was smiling when he led the group in, once he entered the hall, his smile was replaced with a straight, serious face. The people who were following also put on a serious expression. Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing were the sect master's personal disciples, but even they had seldom come to this hall. Thus, when they entered, they became respectful and their behaviors formal, as they stood near the hall entrance not daring to make a sound. Old fourth and old sixth of the Piaomiao's six tigers, as well as chief disciple Zhang Chengyue were standing at their own allocated positions, while waiting for sect master Ou Peng to take his place.

Ou Peng walked into the inner most area of the discussion hall and sat on a large adorned chair, before facing his audience. After seeing the sect master comfortably seated, the rest then carefully seated themselves.

Ou Peng glanced at his audience, and then said to Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing "Both of you come over as well. Find someplace and sit down."

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing replied in unison "Thanks sect master." Then, they found two chairs and seated themselves down as well.

Ou Peng then continued "Describe what happened for us."

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing exchanged glances, and Wen Wenhai spoke up “Yes, sect master, the mission went on like that. “Then, Wen Wenhai described the events after he and his junior sister left Piaomiao sect, up till where he met his two senior uncles, without missing a single details in his recount, including the fact that he save Zhang Cai and his family. However, he intentionally left out two important points, the incident when Xue Qing gave her plaque to Zhang Cai as well as the fact that they pocketed three stalks of precious herbs for themselves. However, when he finished his narrative, he included a line at the end “However, there are two matters which needs to be explained, please forgive disciple for omitting them in my report.”

Ou Peng pondered, and nodded in approval.

Then, Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing took out the silver box and the flat stone box, as well as the bag of precious herbs from their possessions, and displayed the items on the table beside Ou Peng.

Ou Peng did not open the silver box, instead, he told old fourth “You can carry on with your things, we will wait for you.” Old four replied “I understand.”, and then, he stood up and left the hall hurriedly. Only Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing let their confusion seep out on their faces, the other audiences were as quiet as if they were in meditation.

Not long after, old four returned, nodded hurriedly at Ou Peng, before retaking his position.

Ou Peng then said “Everyone has suffered. We can finally see some returns after such a long period of investment. Shall we look at the contents of the treasure now?” Saying which, he smiled towards the audience.

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing were not aware that Ou Peng’s friendly side; he would always appear solemn and serious in the discussion hall. Hence for today, the people in the hall were feeling curious, as they knew that a treasure which could excite their sect leader could not be an ordinary one.

Ou Peng picked the silver box up first, carefully opened it, and saw a booklet inside. He took out the booklet which felt soft to the touch, yet it did not feel like paper or silk, and thus the material remained a mystery. A single word, “sword”, was written on the cover, its font was similar to Piaomiao sect’s signboard

except the calligraphy betrayed a hint of murderous intent. After Ou Peng read the cover, he flipped open the book and scanned through the contents at his own casual pace. As he flipped through the pages, his eyes became squint and but he did not say anything.

After half a bell worth of time, Ou Peng's gaze move back onto the silver box, as he carefully examined it again. Suddenly, his eyes lighted up, and he extended his hand and uncovered the base which the booklet was on, revealing three neatly placed bottles; the silver box turned out to have two layers, with the first layer where the booklet was placed reaching up to only a third of the height of the box. Ou Peng was even more cautious as he took out the first bottle; the bottles were actually carved from jade, with some unknown material used to seal its contents, and on the first bottle were the three words "Qi strengthening pill"! Ou Peng's mood soared, this Qi strengthening pill was something that existed centuries ago, and was used to strengthen one's inner energy. Its recipe was lost long ago, but according to the books within the sect, this pill could be consumed to provide thirty years' worth of inner energy training. If he were to consume on the pills here and now, his inner energy would... As Ou Peng let his imagination run wild, his hands actually began to tremble.

He then carefully put the bottle back into the box, and took out another one. This bottle was almost identical to the first bottle except that the words carved on it said "Bone reinforcing pill." Ou Peng wrinkled his brows, what was the use of such a pill? To reinforce the bones? There were no records of such an item among the books in the sect, but for it to be placed with the Qi strengthening pill, it had to be an equally precious item. When he had the time, he could ask the other three factions, perhaps one of their libraries would have records of it. He then carefully placed the bottle back to its original position.

After that, he took out the last bottle, and when he saw the three words carved on its front, he lost control of himself and stood up on the spot, wide-eyed. The other people in the discussion hall also stand up immediately, not knowing what their sect master saw for him to react in such a way.

Ou Peng calmed his thoughts and seated himself again, while signaling the other people to sit down. At that moment, he began to feel a tinge of regret, he regretted not bringing Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing into the discussion hall with

him along. Now that these items were placed out in the open for everyone to see, he could not hide them for himself anymore. However, these items were truly that precious, and it was not because he did not trust his sect members, but rather that the value of the items could cause the downfall of his sect if they were leaked to the public.

Ou Peng could not help but ponder deeply again with his eyes closed.

The audience was surprised to see their sect master excited one moment and worried in the next, his behavior was truly abnormal.

After Ou Peng made his mind up, he opened his eyes and reverted to his original expression. He placed the bottle back into the box, and picked up the booklet again, handing it to Zhang Chengyu, saying “Give this to your senior uncles to see. You all can take a look at it as well.”

The booklet was passed around as everyone skimmed through it once, while Ou Peng announced “Chengyue, make a copy of this book and pass the copy to your sixth senior uncle. The original copy will be left in our restricted library to be kept safely.

Zhang Chengyue nodded in acknowledgment. Then, Ou Peng turned to Old sixth and said “Old sixth, you will be responsible for nurturing the disciples. Pick a few with exceptional aptitudes to practice this sword manual, and in the future, our Piaomiao sect will own another branch of sword arts.

Old sixth replied “Yes, sect master, I will do my best to allow this sword art to flourish in our sect.”

Ou Peng nodded without a word.

Then, Ou Peng announced the identities of the pills in the first two bottles while everyone gleamed with envy. These pills were truly top quality items, only that they were not aware of the number of pills and if they would have the opportunity to consume one.

Finally, Ou Peng said “There is another bottle of pills, and it contains the legendary “longevity extending pills”, although we cannot confirm authenticity.

The audience was stunned as he voice rang throughout the hall.

Although the qi strengthening pill was known to be a profound medicine in the Jianghu world and all the martial artists would scramble to obtain one, the longevity extending pill was so famous that its name was widespread among the ordinary population. It was a legend among the legends; everyone has of its efficacy to extend one's lifespan by a decade, but no one has seen it for at least a thousand years. Even intelligent people would be stumbled if they were asked to calculate the length of someone's life, so even if someone had consumed such a pill, who was able to tell if it was effective? Not to mention who would use such a valuable pill on a person who is near death? Not before long, everyone treated it as a joke, and it became a popular material for fictitious story-tellers. For such a joke among the ordinary households to appear among precious medicines like the "Qi strengthening pill", one would be in a dilemma to laugh or cry.

Was it real or fake?

However, everyone already knew that whether it was authentic or not, if other sects caught wind of its appearance, then even the survivability of the Piaomiao sect would be in question.

It was no wonder that the sect master's behavior was so erratic previously. It seems that they should not pursue this matter any further. However, the only question is, did the other three factions obtain the same items?

Everyone, including the sect master, had such thoughts in their hearts.

Next, the sect master opened the clothe bundle where the herbs were kept, and was thus treated to another shock. There were hundreds of years old ginsengs, Tainqi, Sanjing, etc..... many without familiar names as he looked at the contents of the cloth bundle, he felt fear crawling through his heart. Never in a hundred or thousand years would he expect to receive such gains. Had he known earlier, he would not have cared about his reputation or pride, and would personally set off for the expedition. Taking into account Sir Yanming's antics, who would care to play scissors paper stone with him? Instead, he would have sparred immediately. This time, Sir Yanming has missed a rare opportunity, and fortunately for him, little Hai and Qing'er had arrived back to the sect safely. Had anything happened to these precious treasures, then it would be already be too late for regrets.

For Ou Peng to have so many thoughts running through his head was natural, as he had just seen pills from the legends and while he could not ascertain their authenticity, the items were consumable in nature and limited in quantity. At least, the precious herbs in front of him were things which value could be verified. A stalk of hundred year old ginseng could be a lifesaver in a perilous situation, and when prescribed with other herbs, its effects would even be enhanced. When he was listening to Wen Wenhai's story, he was unable to determine the extent of its importance as they thought Sir Yanming was exaggerating. However, now that he has seen the treasures with his own eyes, and with the knowledge that there were even more in the secret area, it seems that the four factions would need to meet and discuss things more formally.

Then, as everyone in the audience looked at each other, Ou Peng excitedly called Zhang Chengyue to inform the hallmaster and elder of the pharmacy hall to join them in the discussion hall.

Chapter 20: Box

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Box

While they wait for the arrival of the pharmacy hallmaster, Ou Peng was unable to control his curiosity again as he picked up the last, seemingly ordinary box, his heart was filled within anticipation as he had seen more precious items than he ever did in his life during that short period of time it took for a kettle to boil. He wondered, could the contents inside the box be even more wondrous than the legendary longevity extending pill?

The box was cooling to the touch, and it felt very heavy. Ou Peng carried it to the front of his face for a closer examination; the box was a single item as a whole, its material was unknown, and there did not seem to be a trace of a lid or place for opening. Ou Peng tried pressing on all four sides of the box, followed by the top and its bottom, but there were no results from his effort. Surely he did not have to use his teeth? Ou Peng inwardly joked, as he placed the box onto the table and called the rest of the people to step forward for a closer look.

Everyone gathered around to look for half a bell worth of time; old fourth and old sixth also took their turns and tries various methods to no avail. Zhang Chengyue wrinkled his brows and asked “Sect master teacher, could it be that it requires a key?”

Old sixth snorted and said “Junior nephew, an object that requires a key would have a keyhole. This box does not have one, not to mention any hidden lock mechanism. How would we use the key?”

Zhang Chengyue turned slightly red, and stood aside without refuting his elder.

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing had already seen the box at the secret area previously, and Wen Wenhai even tried to opened it before. Seeing that his sect master and senior uncles fail in their attempts, he did not dare to suggest

anything new. Conversely, Xue Qing full of interest towards the box she personally won through scissors paper stone, she even placed her ear beside the box while she shook it to catch for any sound, but her attempts did not meet with any success.

Just as everyone finally ran out of ideas, the pharmacy hall's hall master Bai Yun and elder He Yunpo entered the discussion hall, bowed towards the sect master before they were led by Zhang Chengyu to the table where the precious herbs were placed. Their reaction was out of everyone's expectations, not because they were not surprised, but rather too surprised. When the two men saw the contents of the bundle, their pupils became still and their feet froze, as they pointed from their position at the herbs, their arms quivering and mouth salivating.

After half the time it took to boil a kettle of tea, the two men finally regained their senses. They did not mind the people aside who had teasing expressions on their faces, and mumbled between themselves "This, this is a six hundred year old ginseng, that is a four hundred year old Tianjing, this? A seven hundred year old Golden thread grass? That should be right; it matches the description in the <<Book of Herbs>>. What about this? Am I seeing things right, this should be a thousand year old beheading dragon grass. How could it be here? However, most of its roots are as fine as cord while slightly bent, the stem is erect with vertical folds, glabrous and slightly white hairs at the apex, leaves are pale green but deeper green on the underside, the leaves at the base are egg-shaped and jagged edged. Following the tooth-shape of the edges, a silver tooth edge signifies hundred years age, whereas a golden tooth edge signifies a thousand years of age, these edges... these edges are golden, am I dreaming now? Hallmaster Bai muttered as he slapped his face, before yelping from the pain.

Elder He Yunpo was in a similar state, he began to mutter words that appear foreign to the bystanders under his breath, with a face of disbelief, before picking up a palm-shaped herb, saying "What is this, a cactus?" Hallmaster Bai replied "Don't talk rubbish. It is written on the <<Book of Herbs>> that cacti has thorns, did it prick your hand? That is fin grass."

Elder He was obviously upset, and replied "The <<Book of Herbs>> states that fin grass has the shape of a hand with three fingers, this one obviously has four."

Hallmaster Bai studied the herb more closely, and shook his head “I don’t know, I don’t know either. There are at least four to five types of herbs that I have not seen before. The question is if they are recorded in the <<Book of Herbs>>?”

Elder He squinted his eyes as he thought, before nodding his head “I don’t know as well. My knowledge is too narrow, I have not learnt enough.”

At this moment, Ou Peng interrupted “Hallmaster Bai, Elder He!”

His words surprised the two men, and they then realized that they were in the discussion hall and not at the pharmacy hall where they usually conduct such discussions. The two men quickly cupped their hands towards everyone and said “Please forgive us. We were caught up in our joy upon seeing so many top quality herbs, and thus got lost in our discussion.”

Everyone replied that they did not mind.

Ou Peng asked “These two sirs, how much would you value their usefulness?”

Elder He replied “May I know where did sect master obtained this herbs from? Ginseng, Tianqi, Tianjing, Heshouwu, *etc.* are not uncommon, but their value and scarcity increases with their ages. Hundred year old herbs are already rare, but the herbs here are at least three hundred years old. The golden thread grass, snake gall grass, *etc.* are used to treat serious external wounds, whereas the snake saliva grass, Shanhu grass, Shifengyao, *etc.* are used to treat severe internal injuries. The other herbs are also rare herbs, and when prescribed with other herbs, they can be used to produce quality medicine.”

At his moment, hallmaster Bai was also awakened from his senses, and he urgently warned “Sect master, you must not disclose the location where these herbs are found under any circumstances. Among these herbs are the beheading dragon grass and peacock grass, which are the main ingredients used to refine pills that strengthen Qi and improve one’s martial power.” His words shook everyone and their ears stood up.

Ou Peng asked “Does our library have any records on the recipe for the Qi strengthening pill?”

Hallmaster Bai replied “No, the recipe for the Qi strengthening pill has been

long lost. The libraries only record a few pills of similar functions, but their efficacy pales greatly in comparison, while their recipes require rarely found herbs.”

Ou Peng then said “Hallmaster Bai, you can take these herbs back to the pharmacy for further study on their usages. Also research extensively on those pills which have Qi strengthening properties. If your research yields good results, then perhaps...”

Ou Peng did not finish his statement, but hallmaster Bai understood his implied meaning, and immediately replied “Your subject will follow your instructions.”

Thereafter, he and Elder He carefully packed the herbs back into the cloth bundle and carried it as they walked out of the discussion room.

Everyone’s sight fell again on the box which could not be opened. After thinking for a while, Ou Peng instructed Zhang Chengyue to call inventions hall’s hallmaster Shi Yukun. The inventions hall was where Piaomiao sect’s weapons and secret weapons were made, and hallmaster Shi is one of the leading weapon crafting grandmasters in Pingyang city.

Not long after, Shi Yukun entered the discussion hall. After inspecting the box for half a bell worth of time and using various methods, he ended up with no results like everyone else.

He then pondered, before suggesting to Ou Peng “Sect master, why don’t we let Shi Niu try as well?”

This Shi Niu was boorish fellow who trained in Piaomiao sect’s Adamantyl hands. He was not exceptional good in martial arts, but had superb strength, and when coupled with Adamantyl hands, his pure strength was ranked top in the sect.

Shi Yukun’s words broke the dreams of several people; the box was a tool to keep items, so it was safer to not break the box while retrieving the contents inside. However, since they were still unable to open it, then the only alternative left was to break the box apart. After all, the highest priority was still to obtain the items in the box.

Shi Niu then entered the discussion hall. He was a sturdy youth, whose height was at least one head taller than the rest of the people in the discussion hall, with rippling muscles all over his body. Seeing the naïvely loyal smile on his face, Ou Peng did not elaborate on unnecessary details, and simply ordered “Open this.”

Shi Niu received the box, and without saying anything else, he exerted strength into his two arms to pry the box from its middle, but the box remained unchanged. Shi Niu then placed the box on the ground, took a deep breath and circulated the Qi in his dantian, and the muscles on his arms grew visible larger, even his fingers grew thicker than it was a moment ago. With a roar, he thrust both arms onto the box, resulting in a “Ping” sound as his arms collided onto the box. However, the box did not break apart as everyone expected, but it sunk deeper into the discussion hall floor.

Shi Niu then picked the box up from the floor, and seeing that it was still undamaged in any way, he shook his head and glanced towards the sect master, with his helplessness evident on his face. In his heart, he thought “What on earth is this thing?”

After sending Shi Niu away, Ou Peng felt burdened in his thoughts, how should he proceed with this box?

Suddenly, his eyes brightened, and he pulled out a precious sword from his waist before sheathing it back. The other spectators in the hall gleamed as they realized the intentions of their sect master. Without waiting for his master’s instructions, Zhang Chengyue automatically turned towards Shi Yukun and said “Hallmaster Shi, isn’t “Breakwater” still in the hands of your hall? Why don’t you bring it out so we can try to open the box with it?”

Shi Yukun glanced at Ou Peng, and seeing that his sect master did not object, he said “Would sect master and everyone please hold on, I will leave and return in a short while.”

Ou Peng nodded in approval.

Shi Yukun returned soon after with sword. The sword had an appearance unlike ordinary swords, its blade surface was black in color, and the light reflected from it would be slightly eye-piercing, like black electricity.

Shi Yukun raised the sword and casually tested it on a corner of the box. However, under the swipe, the box did not have any reaction. Then, he took a deep breath and raised “Breakwater” high up, concentrated his gaze on the same corner of the box, and swung it down with his full power.

Unexpectedly, there was no sound of metal from the collision, nor was there any sound at all, as if the blade was just used on soft cotton. The box remained at its position, with no mark or change on its surface.

Seeing the failed attempt, Ou Peng said to Shi Yukun as the latter prepared for a second attempt “Pass the sword to me.”

Ou Peng received the sword from Shi Yukun, placed the box back at the dent on the floor which Shi Niu created, then circulated the Qi in his dantian, while the color of his face changed continuously until the sixth change, while old fourth and old sixth who were aside looked on with an envious gaze, thinking in their hearts “Senior brother sect master has such a deep understanding in this Piaomiao sect technique that he actually trained up to the sixth level.”

Ou Peng lifted “Breakwater” and covered the sword with Qi from his body, resulting in several colors appearing on its surface. With a resounding roar, Ou Peng swung the blade onto the box.

Chapter 21: Mystery

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Mystery

The sword was like black electricity as it shot towards a corner of the box, carrying the colors of Piaomiao sect's martial technique along with it.

It was a pity that this electricity was not real lightning from the sky, and as "Breakwater" landed on the corner of the box, it did not cause any sound from the collision like the previous attempt. Nevertheless, there were a slight difference; a barely perceivable glow emitted from the box and hugged the sword blade when it approached, causing the sword to rebound towards Ou Peng like electricity.

Upon seeing the oncoming "Breakwater" heading towards him, even though he had faced the back of the sword, Ou Peng had no doubts that his body would be chopped into half if the blade hit him.

Ou Peng was indeed deserving of his reputation as one of the top martial experts in Jianghu and the sect master of Piaomiao sect; even at the face of danger, he was able to make the split second decision to execute Piaomiao sect's ultimate technique "Piaomiao Steps" to avoid the incoming danger. The black electricity that was imbued with the multicolor light barely scratched his forehead, and as "Breakwater" flew out his hands and shot towards the stone wall of the discussion hall, it did not cause a loud sound upon the collision, but was embedded deeply into the wall as if the wall was tofu.

Only a few breaths of time passed from when Ou Peng raised the sword to the sword flying out of his hands and into the wall. Everyone almost had no time to react, and as they looked at the sword which was entrenched in the wall, they all had only one thought in their hearts "What a fast sword."

Unfortunately, these were not the thoughts currently in Ou Peng's mind. When he saw the few strands of his hair gently descending onto the floor, his whole body broke out in cold sweat. Having been in the Jianghu for so many years, Ou Peng had encountered his fair share of dangers and surprises, but none were as ridiculous as the earlier moment. In his heart, he thanked Piaomiao sect's grand headmaster, and he thanked his own master, and he thanked this "Piaomiao Steps", for he would no longer be alive if not for them.

As everyone else regained their senses, and then looked at their sect master again, the ghostly pallor on his face has regained some of its earlier flush. He was even more cautious of the box now, and said to Zhang Chengyue "Chengyue, take this box and keep it in the secret book repository on your way back. Since we cannot open it, we shall leave it to up to the fate of the future generations.

Then, he waved his hands and motioned for Zhang Chengyue to bring it away.

Ou Peng truly deserves his reputation as one of the most dignified heroes in Jianghu. If it were someone else in his shoes, the person might not have placed the box within Piaomiao sect, and instead kept it in his own private collection, while slowly wearing the box down until the day he managed to extract the treasures from within. Thus, his decision was admired by everyone, and this was actually one of the reasons why he was chosen as the sect master over the other five of his fellow brother disciples.

Actually, everyone was well aware in their hearts that they did not have the personal ability to open the box, and even the thousands of people in the sect would be unable to. However, the sect master's open way of dealing with such a situation meant that they could sharpen their skills and try again in the future.

Then, Ou Peng discussed the matter of the next meeting which Sir Yanming proposed, and everyone agreed that given the large gains from the earlier expedition, the next meeting would not be as simple anymore. Thus, they should wait for the first and second elder to return before discussing again. Finally, Ou Peng waved his hands, and everyone scattered back to their respective places, leaving only Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing behind in the discussion hall.

As everyone took their leave, they nodded at the two as they passed them by, knowing that the sect master had requested the two to stay behind in order to

award them for their success. With such fruitful returns from the trip, it seems that these two later generation disciples would be in for a good reward.

After everyone left the discussion hall, Zhang Chengyue and old four went to the secret books repository together. The sword manual was naturally placed on the bookshelf, but the box was very ordinary looking for something of its value, and even if it was placed in a conspicuous location, it may not fulfil the intentions of the sect master. After pondering, old fourth pointed to the table beside the bookshelf and said “Junior nephew, why don’t we place it there for the time being. You can ask your master again when you meet him later.” Zhang Chengyue agreed that it was the most suitable temporary solution, thus, he casually put it on the table. Anyway, all visitors to the secret books repository would have their names recorded, so they were unafraid if someone did take it away. How many people would have the ability to open the box anyway?

Zhang Chengyue and old four left worry-free, and thus, the box had found its home in the Piaomiao sect’s secret books repository, while waiting for its predestined owner.

In the discussion room, Ou Peng waited for everyone else to leave before he spoke again, this time with a large grin on his face “Little Hai, Qing’er, you have performed exceptionally well this time round. What would you like as a reward?”

Wen Wenhai took a step forwards and reminded “Master, there are still two more matters that I have yet to report, I shall say them now.”

Ou Peng nodded in approval.

Then, Wen Wenhai repeated the words that Sir Yanming said in the secret area “When disciples are out on a mission, whatever treasure that they are fated to encounter will belong to them.” However, Ou Peng’s mood did not change upon hearing and he asked jovially “So what treasure did you obtain?”

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing walked forward and took out the three mature herb stalks that they took in the secret area and placed them before Ou Peng, saying “We did not find any pill or weapon, so Sir Yanming allowed us to pick three stalks of herbs to keep.”

Ou Peng laughed “This Sir Yanming is truly smart. He actually thought of such an idea in order to obtain more gains for himself. How can we object when he

shared the gains with our disciples?”

When they heard Ou Peng’s reaction, Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing were shocked and they urgently asked “So there was no agreement like such? Then, as for the herb?”

Ou Peng said “It is okay since Sir Yanming has already allowed it. Being your master, I cannot take advantage of my position and restrict your welfares. Furthermore, there are still many of these in the secret area, so you only received your share slightly earlier than the rest.”

Only then did Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing calm down. Even though there were many of such herbs in the secret area, but how much could each disciple receive after the distribution? At the same time, they realized Sir Yanming’s intentions. Even though the herbs were going to be distributed by their respective factions, given Sir Yanming’s experience and martial skill level, his chances of receiving a significant reward may not match up to his own desires.”

Then, Ou Peng continued “You should bring these herbs to the pharmacy so that hallmaster Bai can refine some pills for you. It should be more effective than consuming the herbs on their own. Otherwise, if any problem cropped up, then wouldn’t it be a waste of such a valuable resource?”

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing nodded their heads in understanding.

Ou Peng pitied his two disciples, and said again “You have contributed greatly to the sect with your meritorious deed, so I cannot let you go without any rewards. What else would you like?”

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing exchanged glances. Actually, they had not expected such bountiful dangers or rewards before they set off. Even Ou Peng was surprised by the harvest of the mission, not to mention the two disciples. Thus, he was unprepared to reward them, and asked the two for their opinions instead.

Xue Qing replied “Master, we had not thought that far ahead. The reason for this mission’s success is due to master’s clever devising, furthermore, we have already gained many benefits, so there is no need to reward us any more than this.”

Ou Peng felt satisfied as he looked at his two disciples, and then said "Good. In that case, I will record that I owe you a reward, since it will not be too late when either of us think of an idea of what you should be rewarded with."

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing both smiled as they agreed.

Ou Peng asked "About the other matter?"

Xue Qing went forward and kneeled "Master, it went like this." Then, she recounted the events that led to her giving her plaque to the Zhang family.

Ou Peng replied "You both did well. Entering the Jianghu is to gain power to protect the ordinary folks, I am proud to be your master. Zhang family was willing to stick their heads out in such a difficult situation; this demonstrates their goodness, so you do not need to worry that they will misuse the plaque. I fully approve of Qing'er's actions."

Only then did Xue Qing stood back up.

Ou Peng then said "Little hai, Qing'er, both of you must be worn out. Go back and get some rest, and prepared for the inner competition that is beginning in a few days' time. Come find me if you meet any difficulties in your training."

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing then bowed and took their leave.

When they reached the entrance of the discussion hall, Ou Peng suddenly shouted "Shitu Ping of the fierce tiger sect also entered the secret area, did she take three stalks of herbs as well?"

Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing exchanged glances, and replied "Yes, but we left earlier so we did not know how they handled the matter."

Ou Peng nodded his head as he returned to his own thoughts.

At this moment, fierce tiger sect's Shitu Ping was not in good spirits like Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing, she was currently seated in the discussion hall of thousand swords peak sect, with a face full of disbelief as she looked at the sect master Wan Chengjiu. In an unwilling tone, she asked again "Was there really not such agreement?"

Thousand swords peak's Wan Chengjiu had a long dark face and a short brawny stature. He smiled without revealing his teeth and said "Shitu sect

master, would I lie about such a matter? Xiangyang, take all the herbs which you picked and pass them to your senior uncle Cheng with the rest of the herbs so he can refine pills from them.”

Ma Xiangyang lowered his head as he replied “Yes, sect master.”

Then, Wan Chengjiu said to Shitu Ping again “Sect master Shitu, the herbs which you picked must be returned to our thousand swords peak. After we refine them, we will carefully decide the appropriate portion for you before distributing it to the others.”

Shitu Ping was naturally very unwilling to hand her share of the herbs over, but the other party was much stronger than her. After pondering for half a bell worth of time, she clenched her teeth as she passed over the herbs in her possession. Towards Wan Chengjiu’s promise, she was not at all interested. Why would she want to receive some of the pills when she could have enjoyed the benefits exclusively? Ma Xiangyang was Wan Chengjiu’s own disciple, who could she tell if the herbs he surrendered in her face would be returned to him privately later? Whatever. Shitu Ping shook her head as she tried to wash away the unhappy thoughts.

At this moment, Wan Chengjiu said again “Sect master Shitu, you have helped our sect with a meritorious deed, thus deserve some repayment. What do you think of our thousand swords peak’s power?”

Chapter 22: Hidden thoughts

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Hidden thoughts

Shitu Ping replied in an even tone “Compared to a small sect like my fierce tiger sect, of course it is worlds apart.”

Wan Chengjiu continued “What if I allow our sect’s elder Yun Feng take you in as his disciple? From then on, we can be considered as one family, your fierce tiger sect and our thousand swords peak can live together harmoniously, wouldn’t that be ideal?”

Shitu Ping revealed a joyful expression to hide the bitterness in her heart. If she given such an opportunity in the past, she would have been overjoyed and agreed immediately without even pretending to ask for some time to think. Now that she was entangled in the secret mission, thousand swords peak would not let her off easily in fear of the location of the secret area being divulged. By recruiting her into the sect, the fierce tiger sect which she led would be handed over to the thousand swords peak. Even though the sect was not large, it was still hers so she was unwilling to hand it over to someone else on a silver platter.

However, Wan Chengjiu’s following words unsettled her thoughts “Sect master Shitu, if you join our sect, given that you have performed a meritorious deed for us, I will allow you to choose a suitable set of high tiered martial arts technique from our libraries, which should help to boost your martial skills and propel you into the realm of experts within the Jianghu.”

Shitu Ping was no longer undecided; she immediately knelt down and paid her respect “This disciple pays her respect to sect master uncle.”

Wan ChengJiu smiled as he supported her to stand, saying “Good disciple niece. In a few days, we will pick an auspicious period to welcome you to the

elder Yun's doors. Xiangyang, come over here to meet senior sister Shitu."

Xiangyang followed his master's instruction and stepped forward to pay his respects "Greetings to senior sister."

Shitu Ping returned the greeting "Greetings to junior brother."

Thus, within the thousand swords peak's discussion hall was a harmonious and peaceful atmosphere.

Far away amongst the deathly wind and bloody rain of Jianghu, the Zhang household in the Guo village was enjoying incomparable warmth in their courtyard.

The afternoon sunlight was bright and warm despite the winter. Within Zhang household's courtyard, Zhang Cai had led everyone to bask in the warmth of the sun. Winter was the favorite period of farmer households; not only were they exempted from the fields, the ladies who were taking turns to watch the stove could also enjoy the company of the men. Guo Sufei was feeling immeasurable contentment in her heart at this moment, especially towards the Liu Qing who was embroidering beside her.

Guo Sufei did not expect Liu Qing to arrive so soon, it was still the New Year period after all, and she had expected the girl to come during the busy spring season instead. When Liu Qing unexpectedly showed up yesterday, Guo Sufei was still in a flurry trying to feed the patients in her family. Upon her arrival, Liu Qing greeted the family and immediately went to lend Guo Sufei a hand, bringing back the many household chores onto their tracks. Furthermore, Liu Qing also brought Zhang Xiaohua some five spiced meat, the grandmother some snacks, causing the latter two to be all smiles for the rest of the day. Even though the grandmother could not see, she held on to Liu Qing's hands to shower her with praise, causing the latter to blush.

While Liu Yueyue did not arrive, butcher Liu had personally sent his apologies stating that there were matter in his family that require her attention, and since Liu Qing has come, her own family would require someone to look after as well. Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei naturally did not mind, and strongly insisted to butcher Liu "It can't be helped if she is busy, we are already happy to have received her well-meaning intentions." which shook away some of butcher Liu's

embarrassment.

However, butcher Liu's embarrassment only lasted till lunch after Zhang Xiaohua returned home with the wine, and as the two men drank, the matter was soon after left at the back of their heads.

Before butcher Liu left while still stuffed with the lunch and wine, he reminded Liu Qing profusely to take good care of the Zhang household, while he entrusted the latter to look upon her favorably. At that moment, Guo Sufei was thinking in her mind "Do you even need to ask? If we do not look after her well enough, would she still stay with us?"

With the addition of Liu Qing into the household, not only did Guo Sufei feel her hands being freed up, even the whole family atmosphere seemed to have changed. Not only did there were small changes in the house and courtyard, or that the way the dishes were prepared caused everyone's appetite increase, but just simply by her presence was enough to make the family overjoyed.

Even though the first day could not be said to be a good representation of the following days to come, it was enough for the family to smell the honeyed and happy days ahead.

The medicine from Piaomiao sect was extremely effective, within a few days, Zhang Xiaohu felt recovered apart from slight pain in his bones and guts, and while Zhang Cai still needed the clutch to walk, their external wounds have already closed to formed scars. Needless to say for Zhang Xiaohua, he was already up and about on the second day, as he took a wooden stick and jumped around to practice martial arts, although from the looks of things, he seemed to be emulating a wild beast rather than practicing proper orthodox martial techniques. Zhang Xiaolong who had the most serious injuries was the fortunate person these days. His internal injuries were the most severe, and only now did it seem like he was beginning to recover, not to mention the fracture in his arm. However, the thing that led Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu to be envious was whenever Zhang Xiaolong needed something, such as during his meals, Liu Qing would always be there to attend and to feed him. Since it used to be Guo Sufei and Zhang Xiaohua who would take turns to feed Zhang Xiaolong, when Liu Qing took over his meal duties, the couple was initially so embarrassed that the food turned cold before Zhang Xiaolong could finish his meal awkwardly. However, Liu

Qing soon got into her role as his caretaker, and seeing the former's change in attitude, Zhang Xiaolong followed her lead and the two began to grow closer to each other not long after.

Even though Zhang Xiaolong had never read many books, and could not recognize many words, and even his appearance was not uncommon, he gave off a sense of reliability and steadfastness which attracted Liu Qing deeply to him. She felt as if Zhang Xiaolong was a piece of unpolished jade, still waiting in this farming household for the opportunity to be refined, and it was heaven's will that brought her to meet such a man.

For Zhang Xiaolong, his feelings were even more predictable. Liu Qing was not only pretty; she had the steadfastness of a farming household and sensibility of learned background. She was good at housework, had elegant manners which made Zhang Xiaolong sunk more deeply in his infatuation; never had he thought in his many years of farm life that a girl like her would appear in his village. Zhang Xiaolong felt as if he was in heaven, wishing that his injuries would never heal so that this lady who was carved in his heart would accompany him until old age.

In summary, Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing were deeply attracted to each other.

Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei could see what was laid in front of them, but they thought differently inside. Even though their son was strong and able, Liu Qing had an educated background and her sights would be set much higher than an ordinary girl. Even though her household was in the village, her family was still quite well-off and from Zhang Xiaohua's description, their standard of living was far above their own. Thus, their backgrounds were incompatible, and even if Liu Qing was agreeable, her father and elder brother may still object to their union. Thus, they wondered how to test Liu Qing's hidden thoughts.

Even though the warm afternoon light made everyone sleepy, Guo Sufei was deep in her thoughts as she did her embroidery, what could she do to find out the way Liu Qing was feeling about the matter? Right at this moment, the grandmother said "Sufei-ah, I just remembered that Xiaolong should be nineteen years old this year, right?"

Guo Sufei replied "Yes, mother. He will be twenty soon after the New Year."

The grandmother asked again "Earlier on, I heard you say that you were

looking for a prospective daughter-in-law, why have there not been any follow ups to this matter?"

When Guo Sufei heard her mother's words, she felt that things had turned out perfectly, as if someone had given her a pillow just as she was about to feel sleepy. Despite her blindness, her mother could see very clearly the matters of the heart. She hurriedly replied "It was like this, mother. Before the New Year, Zhang Cai and I did have the intention to find a bride for him. We combed through the eligible young ladies in the nearby villages, but the result was either we were willing and the other part was not, or vice versa. After the accident during the New Year, we decided to put this matter on hold until the weather turns warmer."

When she finished her sentence, she saw Zhang Xiaolong looking at her in "complaint", and pretended to ignore him while she continued "Since Qingqing is still living in our house, could you help us look around as well?"

Liu Qing turned red upon hearing Guo Sufei's sentence, and she lowered her head not knowing how to respond.

The grandmother did not intend to let the matter rest, and immediately said "You have to take advantage of the opportunity, and look for someone like Qingqing. She has been taking care of Xiaolong very well these few days, even a blind old woman like me can see that this child is meticulous and attentive. However, because of my sight, I can only guess that she will be as beautiful as her heart. Sufei ah, you have to find me a daughter-in-law like Qingqing, or I will not be satisfied."

Wow, could her words be even more direct? Liu Qing's face blushed hotter, and she ran back into the house in embarrassment. Zhang Xiaolong who was at a side panicked, and flushed "Grandmother, mother, look at what you have done, talking until you chased her away." Then, he looked towards the house, with concern written all over his face, and if not for the injuries on his body, he would have also followed her immediately.

Only Zhang Xiaohua was nonchalant as he sat on his stool, as he admired how the old ginger was spicier than young ginger. He had only recounted the affairs between his eldest brother and elder sister Liu Qing just a few days ago, and his

grandmother had already reacted so quickly.

Actually, Guo Sufei was also feeling surprised, her mother had always been the type to hold her thoughts to herself, yet today she had acted so brazenly to test the lady's hidden thoughts. After all, her own plan was to wait up to half a month before testing Liu Qing's feelings.

Chapter 23: Afternoon

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Afternoon

Liu Qing hid in the small house with her face flushed with embarrassment; she felt both blissful and vexed in her heart. Blissful because her feelings towards Zhang Xiaolong was now out in the open, but vexed because she had only arrived for a few days, and they were already treating her so lightly.

Despite her embarrassment and confused feelings, she had interacted with the grandmother long enough to know that she is a reasonable and understanding woman, and would not have intentionally put her in a difficult situation. However, the old lady must have been muddled from her age, and although her actions were forgivable, how would she have the face to meet everyone outside now?

The people outside were also thinking along the same lines. Zhang Xiaolong was speechless when he saw his grandmother smiled gleefully. However, his body was weak even though the heart was willing, and he could not enter the house to salvage the situation. Hence, Guo Sufei pinched Zhang Xiaohua's ears and said "This matter was caused by you. Go in and convince Liu Qing to come back out again."

Zhang Xiaohua rubbed his ear gently and muttered "What does this have to do with me?"

Guo Sufei smiled as she gave him a nudge, saying "If you did not raise this matter to your grandmother, how would she have known?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied "So you already knew." Then, without any other choice, Zhang Xiaohua picked himself up and entered the house, thinking on what to do as he walked.

Liu Qing was in the house feeling embarrassed when she saw Zhang Xiaohua walked in. Zhang Xiaohua skipped jovially to her front, held her hand and said “Elder sister Liu, it is boring to stay indoors. Come with me to see the field and well I have worked on.”

Liu Qing replied “Okay, I have heard from you eldest brother that you have reclaimed the field all by yourself, and I have been meaning to go over for a look. Let’s go today then.”

Then, Liu Qing pulled Zhang Xiaohua’s hands as they walked out of the house.

Zhang Xiaohua followed behind Liu Qing and as soon as he left the house, he shouted “Dad, mom, I am bringing elder sister Liu to see my field in the hills. We will be back a while later.”

Guo Sufei then replied “Then go ahead and remember to come back early for dinner. Xiaohua, you must protect your elder sister well.”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed and said “No problem, mother.”

Liu Qing walked to the front of Guo Sufei and said in a low voice “Aunt, I will be going now.”

Guo Sufei smiled and replied “Go quickly and come back early.”

Thus, Liu Qing and Zhang Xiaohua headed out of the Zhang family courtyard.

On the way to the hills, several familiar villagers would wave across at the two people. The village was not large after all, thus, whenever something huge happened to one of the families, the news would quickly spread throughout the village. Earlier on when Zhang Xiaohua paid the Liu family a visit, they have already heard that that their relatives’ children would come over for a visit to take care of the injured family members. The plainly visible injuries on Zhang Cai, Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu also provide credibility to the story.

Zhang Cai could not be blamed for his caution, the events at the neighboring village had served as a lesson on the importance of laying low.

Although being relatives was a reasonable explanation, when the villagers saw a lady who was prettier and more elegant than the other girls in the village looking after Zhang Xiaolong, the facts pointed to a different story and it became

an open secret. Hence, they greeted Liu Qing with a knowing expression, which led the latter who initially escaped the house to avoid embarrassment felt even more uncomfortable.

Fortunately, the road was not long, and they soon reached the bridge. Liu Qing loved the river, she loved the way the waters would flow freely downstream, so she asked Zhang Xiaohua “Xiaohua, when you came over to our village, did you see our Bali Gou village’s river?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and replied “Nope, when I went to your village, I was only thinking of how to get you to your own house so I did not notice the river.”

Liu Qing laughed and continued “Bali Gou’s river is many times larger than the river in your village, and there are much larger pieces of land beside the river. My household actually owns one such piece of land, but we rented it out because no one in our household could farm.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied “What a waste, if our family had a plot of land like yours, we would have needed to reclaim some land in the hills.”

As they continued their conversation, they already crossed the bridge which led on to a small winding road up towards the hills. It was not a real road, but because many people travelled along the same route, a trail appeared from the constant tempering of the travelers. Liu Qing took light steps as she walked along the road, her musical-like pace made Zhang Xiaohua exclaimed “Elder sister Liu, the way you walk is really pretty.”

Liu Qing smiled lightly and replied “Little rascal, hurry up and walk.”

Under the winter daytime, the hills were bathed in a rare moment of warmth, so the two people did not feel uncomfortable while walking. The field in the hills looked the same as before, as it laid there by itself after a long period of neglect by its owner.

Liu Qing took a few glances, and said in surprise “Xiaohua, you did this all by yourself? This is a rather large field.”

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and said proudly “Yea, elder sister Liu, I did all these by myself. Eldest brother and second brother did lend a hand from time

to time.”

Liu Qing complemented him “It seems that you are not a simple person, this is really good.”

Then, her gaze fell naturally to the large rock platform under the tree, and asked “This stone is pretty rare, it looks neat and yet its size is so large, we would seldom see such stone at the mountains around my village.”

Xiaohua asked Liu Qing “Elder sister Liu, can guess where this stone came from?”

Liu Qing laughed as she replied “How would I know? Surely you did not dig it up when you were reclaiming the field? Perhaps it was brought over from the riverside?”

Liu Qing walked over to the stone and sat on it, her hands touching the rock, and then realized that the stone was not what she imagined it to be like. It actually contained some warmth, and if not for the ugly color, she would have thought that it was a large piece of jade. She thought to herself “Strange”.

Zheng Xiaohua did not notice these minor details, he was already deadbeat trying to get the rock up, who would have observed if it was warm or cool? Furthermore, ever since it was left there, he no longer paid any attention to it, and even when he sat on it, he attributed its warmth to the sun.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said “Since elder sister Liu cannot guess the answer, I will bring you to see something else.”

Then, he led Liu Qing down the slope and to the well at the pit of the hills. When Liu Qing saw the huge well mouth, she let out a laugh, guessing that the large piece of rock must have come from here. If not, she has never seen a well mouth this large ever before.

Zhang Xiaohua then said “Elder sister, the stone from above was dug out from this well. It took a lot of effort, and the well was almost not completed in time for winter.”

He then used the tools beside the well to draw some water up and passed it to Liu Qing, saying “Try this, elder sister. The water is delicious, even more so than the river.”

Liu Qing received some water and took a small sip; her eyebrow stood, Xiaohua was right about the water. It was even more delicious than the spring water she tried before in the past, and if it was used to make tea, her father would definitely take a liking to it. As the thought went through her mind, she snickered knowing that her father would be too lazy to leave the house, so he might take several buckets home at one go instead.

Liu Qing then asked “Is the spring water around here all this delicious?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and replied “Nope, only the spring water in this mountain is like that.”

Liu Qing persisted “Could it be because the well was constructed at the pit of the hills?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head again before saying “The neighboring village also dug a well, but we do not know if the water from that well is as delicious because nobody would want to go near such things.”

Liu Qing asked curiously “Why?”

Zhang Xiaohua then recounted the story of Mr Wu and his family while Liu Qing listened, feeling horrified.

After half a bell worth of time, Liu Qing looked towards the sun which was beginning to set, and said “Xiaohua, draw some water so we can boil some tea at home tonight.”

Zhang Xiaohua said happily “Is that what I drank at your place? Will it taste bitter? I have tried some from Old Guo who lives at the east part of our village, and it was too bitter.”

Liu Qing replied “I have not seen the tea that you tried before, but it should be the same one. I have brought some over but never had the chance to take them out. I guess we can all try some today.”

Zhang Xiaohua enthusiastically drew a pail of water from the well, and followed behind Liu Qing as they climbed down the hill and head home.

As they were walking, Liu Qing asked “Xiaohua, why do you thjink that Mr Wu’s good fortunate would become such as disaster?”

Zhang Xiaohua thought for a while before replying “If bad people know about your good fortune, and you do not have the ability to hold on to it.”

Liu Qing faced Zhang Xiaohua with a serious face and said “That is right, Xiaohua. You have to remember this, the man is innocent, but when he is at fault when he holds on to valuables.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand and asked “Elder sister, what does that phrase mean?”

Liu Qing explained “The meaning is if a person has been living without any problems, if he obtains such treasure, it will invite calamity. Xiaohua, you are still young so you may not understand this when I say that the most unpredictable thing in the world is human nature. You cannot be assured that whoever who sees your treasure will not be tempted. Mr Wu made a mistake when he let other people know that he dug up a treasure chest. If that piece of information was not let out, no one would know about it and naturally, no one would have robbed him.”

Then, Liu Qing joked “In the future, if Xiaohua chance upon any precious treasure, you must also keep it a secret, because only then can you hold on to it.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled gleefully as he replied “I will, elder sister. If I ever find a treasure, I will not tell anyone except you, okay?”

Liu Qing replied “No, if you told the secret to only me, and I shared the secret to another close person, then what do you think would happen in the end?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said “En, elder sister is right. People will tell other people until everyone knows.”

Then, he continued “Then sister, if the person who dug up the treasure was Hero Wen, would he be alright?”

Liu Qing replied “In that case, the situation is different.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously “Why so?”

Chapter 24: Heartfelt thoughts

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Heartfelt thoughts

Liu Qing continued to explain, “When Mr Wu found the treasure, he did not have the power to hold on to it. Such a situation is called ‘Other people hold a knife while I hold a fish’. Without any power for self-protection, one can only wait to get robbed off all the benefits. However, hero Wen has profound martial skills, and thus the power to protect his possessions, although that would depend on the abilities of his opponent. If his opponent is stronger than hero Wen, then hero Wen will be robbed, and he may even lose his life. If his opponent was weaker, then of course he will be fine. Next, you will have to look at the value of the treasure, there will be people above other people and heavens higher than the sky. If the treasure is exceedingly precious, then there will always be someone who would come to rob you for it.”

Zhang Xiaohua excitedly said, “Elder sister, so if one knows martial skills, he can then protect his own possessions, and the higher his skills are, the more precious treasure he can hold on to.”

Liu Qing smiled and replied, “Yes, Xiaohua is correct.”

Zhang Xiaohua then said, “If I know martial arts, then if there is a conflict in the future, father, eldest brother, second brother will not get hurt, and elder sister will not be bullied.”

Upon hearing, Liu Qing’s expression turned dark as she asked, “But how can martial arts be easily learnt?”

Zhang Xiaohua optimistically replied, “Do not worry, elder sister. I will definitely pick up martial arts to protect all of you.”

Liu Qing replied jovially, “Okay, then I will be relying on hero Zhang in the

future.”

Then, she continued, “Sometimes, martial arts are like a treasure, you cannot share them with anyone. It is necessary to preserve a hidden card for the worst case scenario.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered thoughtfully and asked, “How does elder sister know so much?”

Liu Qing replied, “These are written on the books, if you are well read, you will naturally learn more about the world. In the future, Xiaohua has to read many books, and gain more knowledge. However, what is the use of knowing so much? When faced with absolute power, all knowledge become as useless as paper.”

Liu Qing did not mind as she shared the things she learnt from among the books she read, while Zhang Xiaohua hungrily listened, and these viewpoints which Liu Qing shared would eventually influence the future him deeply.

In the midst of their conversation, the two of them had already reached the entrance of the Zhang household courtyard, and by this time, the sun had already descended onto the mountains. As the last ray of sunlight gets enveloped into darkness, the chilly winter wind rose, while everyone else had already returned into the house. Zhang Xiaohua was smiling secretly in his heart because he has succeeded in his afternoon mission. He asked, “Elder sister, after reading so many books, you will have to share their contents with me in the days ahead, as well as to teach my eldest brother how to read and write, If not you will have nothing to talk about.”

Liu Qing casually replied, “Sure, you can count on me.”

Then, she realized the implications of the words, and thought that this Xiaohua is more than meets the eye. However, she soon set the matter aside as she thought, “This surrounding fence is too short, there is no privacy at all within the courtyard, I should work on it when I have the time.” Without realizing it herself, she has already adopted the mindset of the young mistress of the household.

The interior of the house was warm; Zhang Cai was talking to Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu on the platform, and when Liu Qing entered the house, the three men huddle closer to make space for her. Guo Sufei was already preparing dinner, and when she saw Zhang Xiaohua brought the bucket of water into the

house, she asked, “Why did you bring the bucket beside the well home?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Mother, the bucket is filled with water from the well. Elder sister Liu said that she has brought some tea leaves from home, so we can use the water in here to make some tea.”

Guo Sufei replied, “What is so good about tea, it tastes so bitter, even plain water tastes better.”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed as he said, “Mother, that is because you have not tasted good tea. Do you think that all the tea in the world tastes as bitter as the one in Old Guo’s house? The previous time when I went to elder sister’s house, I had really delicious tea there.”

Liu Qing also said, “Auntie, you will know after you try it.”

Hearing Liu Qing’s persuasion, Guo Sufei also smiled and replied, “Alright, we will follow as Qingqing says.”

Then, Liu Qing filled the kettle with water from the well and placed it on the stove.

The three men who heard Zhang Xiaohua also stood up to see if they could help.

Soon after, the water began to boil, and since the Zhang household did not own a teapot, Liu Qing placed some of the tea leaves in a rice bowl and submerged the leaves in hot water.

As Zhang Cai and the rest watched the tea being prepared, and the aroma of tea wafting through the room, he exclaimed, “Is this tea? How can it be so refreshing?”

Everyone beared the scalding heat as they downed the tea greedily. After finishing their bowls, they all asked for more. Liu Qing replied, “If you drink too much of this tea, you will not be able to sleep well tonight. If you would like another cup, then it will have to wait till after dinner.”

Everyone naturally listened to the expert.

Liu Qing did not forget the grandmother as she carefully brought a bowl of tea for her to taste.

Dinner was the usual fare*, and everyone was in high spirits as they drank the tea. In the night, apart from grandmother, Liu Qing and Zhang Xiaohua, everyone was still wide awake. Grandmother and Liu Qing did not have much tea, whereas Zhang Xiaohua drank the most. Nevertheless, not long after, the latter returned to his dreamland of flickering bright lights.

*TN: Chinese phrase, coarse tea and bland rice, the author made a joke about the tea.

After dinner that day, Guo Sufei kept the bowls and made another batch of tea with the well water for the family, not forgetting to bring a bowl to this grandmother's room.

When she entered the room, the grandmother woke up and asked, "Sufei, is that you?"

She answered, "Yes mother, I have brought you a bowl of tea that Liu Qing brought from home."

The grandmother asked, "Haven't we already had some before dinner? Qingqing said that these should be drunk sparingly during the night."

Guo Sufei replied, "I know mother, I have come for a different matter."

The grandmother was confused, "What other matter, why must we be so secretive?"

Guo Sufei asked, "Mother, what do you think of this child Liu Qing? Why did you have to be so direct in the afternoon?"

The grandmother replied, "Sigh, Sufei-ah. I feel that this child is too good. She is good at housework, is well-read, and Xiaohua says that she is pretty to boot, and her family background is also well off. I am afraid that our Xiaolong cannot match up to her."

Guo Sufei sighed as she continued, "Yes, mother, that is how I felt as well. However, I can tell that she is pretty satisfied with Xiaolong, just that I have not found the opportunity to ask her one-to-one. After what you did this afternoon, I am not sure on how to ask her anymore."

The grandmother replied, "Qingqing is only one part of the picture; we will still

need the approval of her family. From what Xiaohua has told me, they are a family of scholars and are not used to farm work. Their uncles is also a butcher, so there may be some obstacles in communicating with a farming household like ours. Furthermore, their family is quite well off, so it is really difficult to say.”

Guo Sufei said softly, “Precisely because of this, my intentions was to let Qingqing spend more time with Xiaolong, so that if they can cultivate a good relationship, it may help to make the marriage more of a reality.”

The grandmother paused for a moment, and then sighed deeply, “Sufei-ah, it is not that I do not know where you are coming from, but my body has been feeling weaker as time passes. Your father has appeared in my dreams many times to pick me up. I feel that my days are numbered, which was why I acted that way this afternoon. I really want to see my grandson get the girl he likes, and possibly even participate in his wedding.”

As her words came out, Guo Sufei tears started to fall. She wiped her eyes silently, and said, “Mother, you do not have to worry too much. Your dreams only that, just dreams. You will definitely live to see your great grandson.”

The grandmother stroke Guo Sufei’s hair as she said, “Sufei-ah, your mother is well aware of her own health. I have lived a long life, and seen you grow up to marry, form your own family, and even watched Xiaolong, Xiaohu and Xiaohua grow up. I am already contented with my life, and the words this afternoon were from a moment of rashness. The girl has only arrived for a few days, so it is not the appropriate time to talk about marriage matters yet. You must look after this family well, and if the girl is willing to marry Xiaolong, then it will be his and our family’s fortune.”

Guo Sufei continued to chat with the grandmother for a while longer, before getting up and leave. She tried some of the tea which has already turned cold, and poured it into the courtyard before looking at the figure of her mother in the darkness. She was well aware that ever since she gave birth, most of her energy and attention has been placed onto her children, and she had seldom cared or thought of her mother. She always felt that her mother was like a large tress which would always provide her with shade, but after hearing her mother’s words today, she realized that she has overlooked too many things. People would only realize the things they have taken for granted after they lose them,

and she felt that she should have cherished her mother more.”

Regardless of regret or self-disappointment, the only thing she could do now was to pick up the scattered pieces.

Guo Sufei dejectedly walked back into the main room where Liu Qing was doing embroidery under the lamp. Seeing Guo Sufei’s expression, Liu Qing quickly stood up and took the bowl from her hands, asking, “Auntie, what is the matter?”

Guo Sufei forced a smile and said, “Nothing is the matter, I am just a little tired.” Then, she glanced towards the room where Zhang Cai and her sons were in. Seeing that she did not elaborate any further, Liu Qing sat down again and continued with her embroidery, while occasionally glancing at Guo Sufei.

The men in the other room were sipping tea while talking about farm work, while one of them was lying down nursing his injuries. Guo Sufei did not talk much, and said, “Go to bed early. Xiaohua, take good care of your grandmother tonight.”

The men agreed without looking up.

Guo Sufei did not mind, and she continued back to her room, instead of returning to the main room to continue the embroidery.

Liu Qing was surprised, but since Guo Sufei did not wish to discuss the matter with her, she did not try to force it out of her.

As the night grew later, everyone slowly went back to their respective sleeping platforms, and only then did Liu Qing return to her room. The lamp was still lit, but Guo Sufei was already asleep. Thus, Liu Qing extinguished the light and lay down to sleep.

Chapter 25: Night talk (1)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Night talk (1)

Liu Qing laid down but she could not sleep despite the darkness.

On ordinary nights, Guo Sufei would tidy up around the house before going back to bed last. However that night, she had already gone to bed before the rest, and although the men did not pick up on these details, Liu Qing did not missed any of the signs, especially when Guo Sufei's expression when she left the grandmother's room. However, it was obviously not in her position to intervene, so she could only bear it in her heart.

Guo Sufei was tossing in the dark, and Liu Qing could occasionally hear some low weeping sounds. After a long time, Guo Sufei finally calmed down, and she asked softly "Qingqing, are you still awake?"

Liu Qing carefully said "I am still awake, auntie."

Guo Sufei sighed, and apologized "Auntie is sorry to let you see me like that, I had some burdens in my heart."

Liu Qing replied "Auntie, it is okay. Who would not feel stressed once in a while?"

It was then followed by another silence. Guo Sufei then asked "Qingqing, when did your mother leave you?"

Liu Qing thought for a while, and said "From what my father said, she had a serious illness when I was four, and even after seeing several doctors, she did not get better. I had no recollections of her when she passed away."

Guo Sufei said "Maybe having no recollections is a good thing, so you would not miss her too deeply."

Liu Qing replied “That is true, auntie. My impression of my mother was fabricated from the stories my father shared with me. My dad said that she came from a well-to-do family, and at that time, my father’s family was facing some financial difficulties. However, my father’s scholarly pursuits attracted my mother, and despite her parent’s objection, my mother persisted in sticking with my father and eventually left her own home. Sigh, my grandfather was quite a heartless person, I still have no idea of where they are, and they have not come even once to visit us. Father was very knowledgeable, but he disliked the politics, and instead chose to live in the village as a teacher. My mother thus followed him into that life.”

After pausing for a moment, Liu Qing continued “My mother’s body was initially weak, so the doctor advised her not to have any children. However, mother still gave birth to my brother, and much of her vitality was lost in the process, which the doctor said would require several years to recover. When she was pregnant with me, my father persuaded my mother to give me up, but my mother said that since she was pregnant, then it was a gift from heavens and she was willing to give up everything for me. The delivery was very smooth but my mother still collapsed, and she never recovered until the day she passed away. Hence, I have always thought that if my mother had chosen to give me up instead, she would still be alive today.”

After speaking up to here, Liu Qing’s voice started to quiver.

Guo Sufei comforted her and said “Qingqing, when you become a mother, you will realize that a child means the world to any mother. Even though you were still in your mother’s womb, I am sure that you had already occupied all the space in her heart, and that she never considered giving you up. She probably had already planned to deliver you safely into this world by then.”

Liu Qing replied “Yes auntie. Sometimes, I would feel extremely grateful to my mother in my heart. Even though I have no recollection of her, she was able to give up her own happiness, leave her own family and even give up her life for us, which is why I feel that a mother’s love is so common yet noble. Although I have not been here for a long period, I enjoy the harmonious atmosphere in your household. Sometimes, I would feel envious when I see how Xiaohua and the rest rely on you.”

Guo Sufei said “Qingqing, I cannot be compared to your real mother. I have been living in this village since birth, and have not learnt the words or read any books, unlike your mother who is well-read and knows many things. When your uncle married into my family, my thoughts were since the both of us have to live together for the rest of our lives, then we should try to live harmoniously with mutual love and respect, otherwise, where would be the joy in life? Later on, I had Xiaolong, Xiaohu and Xiaohua, and as I saw them grow up, my heart felt proud and contented in a way which you will not understand. Because your uncle and I do not know many things, our children had to suffer and not receive a good education unlike you and your brother.”

Liu Qing said “Auntie’s words are too harsh. Even though we have read more books than Xiaolong and the rest, but on that day in the town when my cousin and I were bullied, where did all the learned men go, and who was it that stood up for me? It is still Xiaolong and the rest who still know morality, and would not cower under coercion to fight for justice. While some people are well read, they lack the courage to act, doesn’t that make them less than the men who are not as well read?”

Guo Sufei felt heartened as she said “Talking about them, I really do feel proud that they have such kind hearts and sensible minds. Even though they can be mischievous, they do not hurt anyone, and knowing our family’s financial situation, they do not cause any trouble. Since young, our fellow villagers have always praised them for their helpfulness. As their mother, I really can’t help but feel proud. Sometimes, I wonder if our family was more financially stable, would they still turn out this way?”

Liu Qing agreed “Yes, auntie. Sometimes, a person’s fate is decided by the heavens. While they have turned out to be good people in this environment, the same cannot be said if they grew up in a different environment.”

Then, Liu Qing noticed Guo Sufei’s spirits being recovered, and she asked “Auntie, it seems that you have not told me about what happened earlier. If it is troubling you inside, it may be better to get it out and share it with someone else.”

Guo Sufei laughed forcefully “Look at me, when talking about my children, I would be derailed from the topic easily. These children are truly inseparable from

my life.”

Liu Qing did not carry on, so Guo Sufei continued “As a mother, I have always put my children s my priority, always caring if they are feeling warm or cold, if they are full or not, in doing so, I have forgotten about my own mother. When I was still a child, my mother would take care of me carefully, she has also seen me grow up and get married. Even though I still take care of her, prepare her lunch and make new clothes for her, we would seldom talk and I would ignore her feelings. Now, I feel that I should have treated her better.”

Liu Qing also felt anxious in her heart. Indeed, every mother under the sky would love their children, but the children themselves would often forget about their own mother. She comforted Guo Sufei, saying “Auntie, grandmother would also be happy as she watches you look after your own children. She does not mind that you neglect her feelings, instead, she will transfer the love she gave to you to her grandchildren. Furthermore, grandmother is still by your side, isn’t that better than me who has no mother to look after?”

Guo Sufei replied sadly “However, when you want to repay your mother and realize that you no longer have much time left to do so, wouldn’t you regret not realizing your mistake earlier?”

Liu Qing took a long sigh, and said “True, the parents will not wait for the child who wants to repay them. However, grandmother has lived for so long, and seen you form your own family, it can be said that she has led a fortunate life. Even though you had not directly looked after her feelings, you have still been taking care of her all these while. I believe that grandmother has never blamed you before.”

After a moment, Guo Sufei said “Qingqing, it feels good to have someone who has read and learnt to talk to. Hearing these words of yours, my heart has become less unsettled. Sometimes, we village folks will not be able to think through things as clearly as you. “

Liu Qing replied “Stop praising me like this, auntie, I am also a person from the village.”

Guo Sufei said “Qingqing, you do not have to be so humble. I at least know enough to tell that there is no village girl in these areas as smart as you. Oh,

about the words this afternoon, I hope you do not take any offence to them.”

Li Qing replied “I won’t, auntie.”

Guo Sufei remained silent for a while, before she finally said “However, Qingqing, this is her very last wish, and since she likes you especially, I have been meaning to ask you, how do you feel towards Xiaolong.”

This time, it was Liu Qing’s turn to remain silent.

Liu Qing did not know how to answer; although she has a good impression of Xiaolong, the period they have known each other was too short to make a conclusive statement. However, a couple will meet from a thousand li apart if fate exists between them. Fate is a very complex thing, some people can leave a deep impression in each other after a few days of interaction, others can remain only friends despite knowing each other all their lives. As for the fate between her and Xiaolong, while he had saved her light a knight in shining armor, and she had pledged to repay him with her body just like how a romantic tale would proceed, she still needed more time to consider before entrusting her lifelong happiness to him.

Grandmother did treat her well, and the family treated her well too, and she herself did like Zhang Xiaolong, and she did like the harmonious and warm household that they have. This household members had mutual respect and love for each other just like the dream household she wanted, and she would like to fulfill the old woman’s wish before she departed from this world, but everything was still too early, and she needed more time to think and reflect.

Thus, Liu Qing found it difficult to answer.

After half a bell worth of time, she said “Auntie, it is getting late, let’s talk about this at another time.”

Guo Sufei grunted softly and she stopped talking thereafter.

The moon shone brightly on the courtyard in Zhang’s household, yet how many people have yet to fallen asleep?

Chapter 26: Night talk (2)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Night talk (2)

On the same night, in Piaomiao sect's mountain villa, within the confines of the discussion hall, there were still people who are awake.

In the nighttime discussion hall, several candles as large as a child's arm were lit illuminating the whole room.

Compared to the crowd which had assembled in the morning, there were only six people currently in the room.

Indeed, they were people who were known to the Jianghu world as Piaomiao's six tigers.

Ou Peng was still sitting on the sect master's seat, on his left was old first Hu Yunyi, old second Li Jian, on his right were old fourth Shangguan Fengliu, old fifth Liu Qingyang, and old sixth Xu Peihua.

Eldest Hu was a muscular middle aged man, dressed in simple and even old-fashioned attire. At first glance, he would appear as an old farmer with an ordinary appearance. Although he was summoned through the sect's emergency signal, he now had a relaxed expression on his face as he sipped on his tea slowly.

Old second had a tall and lean frame; he wore an azure robe and carried a sword in his hand which hung down to his knees. His expression was cold and indifferent, like his name suggests. At this moment, Li Jian's head was lowered and his eyes were squinting as if he was in deep thought.

The old fifth who was sitting opposite was a short and fat man, whose attire appeared even shabbier which exposed the black hair on his chest. There were

two large grand axes at the floor beside his feet, and instead of tea, there was a wine jug placed on his table. The impression that he gave out was an outright contrast from his name. At this moment, he was not indulging in his wine, but was looking around with a roving eye.

Old fourth Shangguan and old sixth Xu were naturally in the loop of the purpose for the meeting that night, and their faces could not hide their own excitement, as they whispered to each other. Although old sixth Xu was supposed to take the last position, he had insisted to switch places with old fifth in order to converse with old fourth. This old fifth Liu was looking at his two fellow peers, and since he could not overhear their conversation, he could only take large gulps of wine as he waited for Ou Peng to speak.

Ou Peng appeared to be pondering, and did not seem to have any regard the rest of the people in the hall.

When his fellow brother disciples began to become jittery, Ou Peng raised his head and looked at the familiar faces, before speaking up,

“Eldest senior brother, second senior brother and fifth junior brother, you all have rushed to the sect this afternoon without even resting. However, I do indeed have something important to discuss with you, and you cannot blame old fourth and old sixth for not hinting about it because I have explicitly ordered them not to, as this matter is extremely important and has to be kept in absolute secrecy.”

First elder Hu slowly put down his teacup, and said, “Brother Sect master has always done things in the most appropriate manner and thus we will not be offended. However, I would like to hear what is this matter that you say is of paramount importance. The Jianghu world has been quite peaceful lately, a few sects have been expanding lately, and the unorthodox sects are laying low. Could it be that sect master brother is planning to expand our sect as well?”

Second elder Li felt that his idea was foolish so and coldly disagreed, “Power is required in Jianghu to make a statement. Without good enough martial arts, setting up these plans will be useless. In my opinion, we should practice our swords more instead of spending time and effort to think of such plans.”

First elder Hu knew that his second junior brother possess a warm interior

under his cold exterior, and tend to be direct without considering the feelings of the other party so he did not take his words to heart. As for fifth elder Liu, he echoed first elder Hu's sentiments and did not take offense to second elder Li's words. Instead, he raised his axe as he said, "Third brother, tell me which bastard has been causing trouble for us and I will chop him down."

Fourth elder Shangguan and sixth elder Xu both smiled at them while they continued to remain silent.

Ou Peng did not know whether to laugh or cry as he grappled the axe from fifth elder Liu's hands, and said, "Old fifth, please sit and calm down, it is not as bad as you think." Then, towards first elder Hu and second elder Li, he said, "First senior brother, second senior brother, we are not going to fight for territories with another sect, and there is even less need to devise a plan."

He paused deliberately, and then said, "This time, I have invited our fellow brother for some good news."

The three people were confused, and they wrinkled their brows. Fifth elder Liu asked, "Third brother, what is the good news and how does it affect us?"

Second elder Li said, "Could it be that a biscuit dropped from heaven?"

First elder Hu did not answer immediately, and thought for a while before saying, "Old third, could this be related to the old beggar you mentioned previously?"

Ou Peng smiled and nodded in agreement.

Fifth elder Liu happily said, "<Curse>, that old beggar was telling the truth? I have long forgotten about this matter, who would after a year?"

Second elder Li maintained his wooden expression as he asked, "When did you leave? You seemed to have stayed in the sect all this while, how would I not know when you left?"

Ou Peng replied, "I did not go personally."

Fifth elder Liu lost his temper and pointed towards fourth elder Shangguan and sixth elder Xu, saying, "I say that these two men have been whispering to each other non-stop since they came in. So it was the two of you, why did you

not tell us earlier?”

Sixth elder Xu hurriedly said, “Fifth brother has made a mistake, we only found out about this a few days ago.”

The other three people were instantly stumped.

Ou Peng then explained, “Old fourth and old sixth did not go, I sent little Hai and Qing’er instead.”

Upon hearing this, fifth elder Liu jumped from his seat and said, “This is an important matter yet you chose to send only two disciples? Aren’t you afraid that a problem might occur?”

First elder Hu glared at the fifth elder and said, “Can you not overreact? Aren’t the two disciples back in the sect safe and sound? Otherwise, how could we be sitting here and discussing this calmly?”

Fifth elder Liu thought for a while before admitting “True...”

Ou Peng smiled as he explained, “It was like this. In order not to attract the attention of the spies from the other sects and give them the opportunity to loot our benefits, the Tan family master, thousand swords peak sect master and I did not agreed not to go personally. Instead, we planned to send our second generation disciples in our stead to the appointed location, and let Sir Yanming who draws the least attention in Jianghu to lead them in.”

Second elder Li said, “This Sir Yanming’s martial skill is ordinary, but he is pretty shrewd, wouldn’t little Hai and Qing’er be taken advantage of?”

First elder Hu sai, “Since old three sent them there, he must have taken some precautions to prevent so.”

Ou Peng rubbed his nose and said “Eldest senior brother is right. Before leaving, we all sent our closest people to his Yanming sect, while he has sent his wife to our sect, and after the mission is completed, we will escort his wife back in exchange for our own people.”

First elder Hu asked, “Who did you send over?”

Ou Peng replied, “I naturally sent Yan’er.”

First elder Hu nodded.

Ou Peng continued, “She has arrived a few days back, and is currently in the mountain villa resting.

First elder Hu also added, “In this type of situations, she would be the only suitable candidate to go. I guessed that it must be hard on her.”

Second elder Li said, “She is your little sister, of course she has to share the burden of this elder brother of hers. However, did this Sir Yanming not play any tricks? That is quite unexpected of him.”

Ou Peng smiled until his eyes narrowed into crescents, saying, “How could he not? He suggested using scissors paper stone to split the treasure loot, and in the end, our Qing’er ended up as the eventual winner.”

Fifth elder Liu also laughed, “How could she not, this gal has never lost in a game before. Even I have been befuddled by her. Serves him right, Sir Yanming has ended up stepping on his own foot.”

Ou Peng continued, “The funniest thing was, he pretended to be kind and said that any additional treasure will belong to whoever was fated to encounter them, yet there were not many treasures so they only share some herbs among each other. Man proposes and heaven disposes indeed.”

“Herbs???” Fifth elder Liu exclaimed, “There were no precious weapon artifacts?”

Sixth elder Xu replied in a normal tone, “Of course there is, it was a Pangu axe.”

Fifth elder Liu immediately jumped up from his seat and rushed towards Ou Peng, saying, “Really? Third brother, this Pangu axe is a dream of mine. This time, you must definitely give it to me. I will use it to cut the entire Jianghu into half!”

Ou Peng did not even reply yet, but first elder Hu interrupted, “Old fifth, return to your seat. We are in the discussion hall, do not forget the rules.”

Fifth elder Liu was quite afraid of first elder Hu, so he returned to his seat reluctantly; his face was full of smiles as he said, “Big brother, you cannot dash my dreams. This axe has to belong to me.”

Second elder Li spoke up, “You actually believe in something like the Pangu axe, do you want me to exchange the Xuanyuan sword for it?”

Fifth elder Liu chortled, “Since when did you have the Xuanyuan sword?”

Second elder Li retorted, “And the possibility of you having the Pangu axe is lower.”

At this moment, first elder Hu raised his voice and said, “Stop letting old six lead you by the nose. The Pangu axe is a legendary item, how could it exist?”

However, Ou Peng mysteriously said, “Even though old six was fooling around, but eldest senior brother, you are wrong this time. There is indeed stuff from the legends inside.”

This time, first elder Hu was also moved, and he asked, “What item? It can’t be herbs right?”

Ou Peng was satisfied at first elder Hu’s reaction, and said, “The herbs were only an additional reward. The real treasure is another thing completely.”

Fifth elder Liu was still unhappy as he snapped, “If it is not the Pangu axe, than what legendary item could it be? The Xuanyuan sword? The Chapter of Heavens? The Everlasting Youth Pill?”

Fourth elder Shanguan said, “Old fifth is pretty amazing to have guessed correctly, I would never imagined that this day would come.”

Apart from the three men, everyone else was shocked into a daze. First elder Hu exchanged glances with second elder Li, and the latter stood up, activated his qinggong, and flew out of the discussion hall in a wisp of smoke, circled the outside of the discussion hall, then landed on the roof of the hall while straining his ears, before finally flying back into the hall and reported to first elder Hu, “There are nobody in the surroundings.”

First elder Hu nodded, and returned to look at Ou Peng.

Fifth elder Liu was still in a daze, as though he did not understand what the two people just did.

First elder Hu then turned to Ou Peng and said, “Old third, describe in detail the treasure you found.”

Chapter 27: Distribution (1)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Distribution (1)

Ou Peng then took a small jade bottle from his breast and passed it to first elder Hu. Even though the latter was usually calm, his hands could not help but shiver, almost dropping the bottle when he saw the three words carved on it.

First elder Hu continued to sit there in a daze, his hands still holding on to the bottle.

Seeing his reaction, second elder Li and fifth elder Liu walked over curiously and looked at the bottle in his hands.

“Longevity extending pill?” The two people exclaimed in unison.

And they subsequently said,

Second elder Li said, “There is something like this?”

Fifth elder Liu said, “What is this?”

First elder Hu and second elder Li had uncertain expressions on their faces, and their worry lines turned deeper.

Fifth elder Liu still could not understand the expressions of the two, and he turned around to see Ou Peng, fourth elder Shangguan and sixth elder Xu. These three people had solemn expressions on their faces.

After the time to boil a kettle of tea, first elder Hu sighed deeply and with a determined look, returned the bottle to Ou Peng.

He said, “Old third, what do you plan to do with it?”

Ou Peng could tell from the change in address; ‘old third’ was the way these brothers would refer to each other, whereas ‘brother sect master’ was used

during formal occasions. Apparently, the other party wanted to speak to him in the capacity of an eldest brother.

Ou Peng hurriedly said in a polite tone, “Eldest brother, isn’t that why I asked everyone to gather, so that we can discuss about this?”

First elder Hu shook his head and said, “Old third-ah, these kind of things should not be shown among brothers, you should have kept it to yourself instead.”

Ou Peng smiled bitterly as he said, “Eldest brother, it is not as if I did not consider that course of action. However, this item was taken out of the secret area, and they were four boxes. I do not know if the other boxes contain the same thing, but when I opened the box on our side, old fourth, old sixth, little Hai and Qing’er were all present.”

First elder Hu replied, “If that is the case, then it’s alright. You should keep them safely, this is not something we can hold on to, and you must not consume them personally. We can wait until the tides of the Jianghu waves to change before taking them out again to take this burden off our hands.”

While the other five people were in deep thought, only fifth elder Liu was depressed, he tugged on sixth elder Xu and asked, “Sixth brother-ah, what is the ‘longevity extending pill’?”

Sixth elder Xu explained impatiently, “Fifth brother-ah, didn’t you mention about the everlasting youth pill earlier on? This is it; this pill is able to extend life by a decade.”

“Ah.....” fifth elder Liu exclaimed, “Just by a decade? Then what are you waiting for, let us take one for each person and extend our lives now.”

Second elder Liu chided, “Just by a decade? If someone else knew that you have consumed such a pill, they would immediately come to your doorsteps and you won’t live past another day.”

Fifth elder Liu argued, “If I hide after eating it, where are they going to find me?”

Second elder Li snickered, “If everyone in Jianghu is searching for you, where are you going to hide? What about the Piaomiao sect? What about your family?”

Fifth elder Liu was speechless, he blinked nervously and stuttered, "Isn't there still you guys to protect me from the front, what would I be afraid of?"

Second elder Li did not pay any further attention to him.

First elder Hu glared at fifth elder Liu and said, "Old fifth, you are not young anymore, can you think before you act, how do we ascertain that these pills are genuine? Even if they are real, who among the six should use it? Your second brother has already mentioned this earlier, even after consuming the pill, who can withstand the pursuit of the whole Jianghu world? Whether or not it is real, we should keep them safe with its seal intact, and only in a worst case scenario should we take them out. Then, we can throw a hot sweet potato over to burn the hands of our enemy."

Fifth elder Liu picked up his wine jar, took a swig from it, and replied, "I only have a mouth, and cannot understand such complicated matters. I am okay with whatever you say as long as you feed the pill to this mouth of mine."

Ou Peng turned to the rest of his brothers and asked, "Dear brothers, what do you think of eldest brother's idea?"

Fourth elder Shangguan stroked his beard and said, "I am in agreement. After thinking for these few days, I feel that it would be better to live the rest of our lives in a stable way than to have ten more years of life. Do not break the foundation that our Piaomiao sect has laid in previous generations, and in the case when our sect faces a crisis, then third brother must handle this matter well, or your mistake can cost everything we have."

Second elder Li nodded wordlessly.

Sixth elder Xu laughed and replied, "I'll listen to eldest and fourth brother."

Fifth elder Liu did not meet Ou Peng's eyes, he continued to indulge in his wine, and Ou Peng's gaze passed over him.

Seeing that no one has any objections, he continued, "Then I shall be keeping this safely, and will use it when depending on the situation in the future."

Seeing that he was ignored, fifth elder Liu muttered to himself, "Even if I ignored, you, you could still have asked for my opinion."

First elder Hu looked at him and asked, “Old fifth, you have something to say?”

Fifth elder Liu stood up anxiously and replied, “No, no. I just wanted to ask if there were any other treasures, apart from this edible thing that cannot be eaten.”

First elder Hu’s face turned wooden, and no longer paid him any attention as he turned towards Ou Peng.

This time, Ou Peng’s face smiled like a blossomed flower, and he took out two more bottles and passed them to first elder Hu.

As he received the bottles, first elder Hu inspected them and exclaimed again in surprise, “Qi strengthening pill? There was really such a treasure? It has been lost for so many years in Jianghu.” Second elder Li could not contain himself, and stood up while maintaining that deadpan expression. Only fourth elder Shangguan, sixth elder Xu, and fifth elder Liu did not get up from their seats; the first two already seen the bottle and the latter was afraid to “Qi strengthening pill? What is this toy?”

Ou Peng raised his eyebrows and smiled, “This Qi strengthening pill should be something that everyone is familiar with. Upon consuming, one will gain the results from twenty years of training. However, this applies only to martial artists who have trained their inner energy, which is to say that among those present here, apart from old fifth and old sixth, our inner energy will soar after consuming this pill. However, according to our sect’s records, there seem to be some drawbacks although they were not clearly stated.”

Upon hearing his words, sixth elder Xu expression turned slightly unnatural, and he questioned, “Third brother, those who train their bodies cannot consume this pill?”

Fifth elder Liu was also upset as he said, “<Curse>, why is my life so unfortunate.....”

Ou Peng maintained his smile and replied, “I have checked carefully, there is no effect to martial artists who trained only their bodies.”

Sixth elder Xu sat on his chair dejectedly, not saying another word.

Fourth elder Shangguan continued to ask, “Third brother, how many pills are

there in the bottle? There are four of us, so if the number of pills does not match, what can we do?”

Ou Peng smiled bitterly as he answered, “I did not dare to break its seal, which is why I asked all of us to gather before daring to open it.”

First elder Hu’s eyes brightened although he maintained his silence.

Seeing the dejected expressions on old fifth and old sixth, he continued, “This bone reinforcing pill is not found among the records of our sect. I have instructed our spies to keep an eye out for more information pertaining to it, and just yesterday, news from Dalin temple arrived saying that there is a record of this in their library.”

Ou Peng then sipped on his tea while ignoring the plaintive gaze of fifth elder Liu, and said slowly, “According to Dalin temple, this bone reinforcing pill is the exact opposite of the Qi strengthening pill. Only martial artist who trained their bodies can consume it to enjoy its benefits, and upon consuming, one’s bone, skin and muscle will be stimulated, causing the external martial arts practitioner’s skills to improve by up to about twenty years’ worth of effort.”

Fifth elder Liu jumped up in joy and rushed towards first elder Hu, saying “Haiz..... I would have never dreamed that such a useful thing would exist in this world.” Then, he extended his hand to take the bottle from him.

However, first elder Hu shifted his body and said angrily, “What are you doing, old fifth? Can you not be so rough?”

Fifth elder Liu replied smilingly, “I was just impatient to see what it looked like.”

First elder Hu berated, “Go back to your seat and you will receive one later on.”

Sixth elder Xu was also as excited as the normal would feel, and he joyfully sat on his seat while trembling in anticipation. His eyes were also focused on the little jade bottle.

First elder Hu did not return the two bottles to Ou Peng, but sat down instead.

He then smiled at Ou Peng while saying in a pleased manner, “Old third, you

are capable, truly capable. Old second, fortunately we did not fight for the seat of sect master in those days, if not, who knows if we could obtain such a wondrous item now. Your contribution has exceeded the previous sect master, the two of us dare not compare anymore. With these two things, our Piaomiao's sect power will rise greatly."

First elder Hu continued to look at the two bottles, and said, "Even if there is only one pill in each bottle, we would be able to produce two supreme martial artists. Even if it cannot be compared to a top-tier sect like Dalin temple, but among the mid-tier martial art factions, our influence will rise not by just one cut."

Ou Peng saw first elder Hu's excited demeanor and said, "Eldest brother, you have over-praised me. Little brother was simply fortunate; this was purely due to luck."

First elder Hu replied, "Luck is also part of power; third brother does not have to be humble."

Then, he continued, "Except, we do not know how many pills are there in each bottle. Then, each brother may not receive an even share."

Ou Peng said, "Eldest brother, we shall let you decide on the distribution of these pills. Even though I am the sect master, I too wish to be a supreme martial artist, but a sect is not built on one person's power alone. Thus, I hope that regardless of the number of pills we have, we brothers will not strain our relationships among each other."

Chapter 28: Distribution (2)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Distribution (2)

After saying his speech, Ou Peng took out yet a slightly larger jade bottle.

The other people, fourth elder Shangguan and sixth elder Xu included, were stumped.

Fifth elder Liu smiled even more widely and asked, “Third brother, what are you doing? Surely you are not taking out the treasures one at a time to watch our reactions?”

This time, Ou Peng did not pass the bottle over to first elder Hu, instead, he placed it on the table beside his seat and looked at the puzzled expressions on the faces around him and said, “Apart from the ‘Qi strengthening pill’, ‘Bone reinforcing pill’ and ‘Longevity Extending pill’, we have also obtained a large amount of rare herbs from this trip. These are ‘Qi improving pills’ which are refined by our pharmacy hall’s hallmaster Bai through his research on their recipe in our libraries. The records in our library states that the efficacy of these ‘Qi improving pills’ is limited, and would differ depending on the constitution of the person who is consuming it. This bottle contains the first batch of pills refined, and there are nine of them inside.”

Upon hearing this, first elder Hu was overjoyed as he clapped his hands and said, “Good, with this pills, even if there is not enough ‘Qi strengthening pills’, the others will not lose out by too much. Furthermore, with its quantity, we can distribute these to our second generation disciples. Perhaps another top martial artist can emerge from our sect again.”

Ou Peng carried on and apologized, “Unfortunately, there is no substitute for the ‘Bone reinforcing pill’. If there is only one pill, our two junior brothers will

have to choose between themselves.”

First elder Hu interrupted Ou Peng and said, “How can there be a perfect situation in this world? To have such an opportunity to increase our martial prowess is already rare in itself. Furthermore, external aids will always be inferior to power cultivated through one’s own means. I trust that our fellow brothers will not choose to go down such an unorthodox path right?”

Everyone felt as if his words had struck their hearts, and they calmed down quickly. They all thought in their hearts “Senior brother is right, the path of martial arts requires a solid training and efforts. If one pursues the path of external aids, then they will be leading themselves to ruin. Such a case is not uncommon in Jianghu. Even though it is important to increase one’s martial skills, our lives are also equally important.”

Ou Peng replied, “Senior brother’s words are too heavy. This is meant to be a joyous occasion; my fellow brothers should not take his words too close to heart, and repent this beneficial thing into a bad one.”

Fourth elder Shangguan also supported Ou Peng and said, “Eldest brother, even though we were drunk in our fantasy for a moment, you should not be too quick to pour cold water over us. Please do not worry. Also, if there is only one of this ‘Qi strengthening pill’, I propose that third brother should be the one to consume it. Firstly, his martial arts have already reached the level of large accomplishments. With the aid of this pill, he would achieve the level of mastery. Secondly, he is our sect master, so the whole sect will benefit if his martial skills improves. Thirdly, this pill was obtained by him. If he does not consume it, how would we have the face to consume it for him?”

Everyone agreed, and first elder Hu returned the jade bottle to Ou Peng.

Ou Peng did not dally to humble himself, and received the bottle straightaway.

With one hand holding on to the bottle, and another hand pinching its seal, Ou Peng pulled the seal off and with a “Ka” sound, the bottle was opened. A thick refreshing scent wafted out. Ou Peng poured the contents of the pills into a jade box that was prepared beforehand, and there turned out to be three pills which he placed into three separate jade boxes. Ou Peng was happy when he saw the pills as he placed the jade boxes on the table and pushed them towards first

elder Hu's side, saying, "I thought that there would only be one pill, but now that two additional pills have appeared, would eldest senior brother please distribute them."

First elder Hu smiled bitterly as he looked at the pills in the jade boxes and he shook his head saying "Old third, you have pushed a difficult problem to me. One pill is enough, how would I split three pills? In that case, one pill will be given to you as we have agreed earlier."

Ou Peng took one of the boxes and kept it in his breast.

First elder Hu looked at second elder Li and fourth elder Shangguan and said, "Old second, old fourth, the both of you take one box each too."

Second elder Li did not get up and he asked, "Eldest brother, what about you? Don't you want one?"

First elder Hu laughed heartily and said, "The oldest will have to give way to the younger generation. I have been your eldest senior brother for so many years, so I should set a good example for you. I have already aged in years, and do not want it anymore. You all are people I have seen growing up, and your welfare is my priority now."

Fourth elder added on, "Eldest brother, keep my share for yourself to use. It is only twenty years' worth of effort; I still have the time to cultivate that much."

Second elder Li agreed, "Yes, eldest brother. You are not young anymore, and it will be difficult to count on your own efforts to reach the top of your martial arts. Fourth brother and I still have sufficient time, so I feel that you should consume one of the two pills first."

Ou Peng also wished to give up his pill, but he knew that it was necessary for the sect that he consume it, and he could not let his sect down for the sake of brotherhood, so he remained silent.

First elder Hu felt satisfied when he saw his brothers' reactions. Even though they were not biological brothers, ever since their master took them into Piaomiao sect, they had grown up together like real siblings. As the eldest brother, he would lead them to train harder, and after they grew up, he continued to lead them to roam around Jianghu, thus earning their reputation of

“Piaomiao six tigers” while shedding sweat and blood along the way. Despite having their own families and accomplishments now, they would still think of him under such temptation, and thus he felt that his painstaking efforts were worthwhile.

First elder Hu laughed aloud and said, “Do not say anymore, I have already decided. The benefits of you two consuming the pill will outweigh mine, so both of you should consume it instead.”

The whole discussion hall became still.

After a moment, second elder Li spoke up, “Eldest brother, I have suggestion. Would you care to listen?”

First elder Hu nodded, “Let’s hear it.”

Second elder Li continued, “As eldest brother knows, I mainly train in our Piaomiao sect’s Piaomiao seven swords, and its requirements on inner energy is not as demanding. My current achievement in the sword arts has already reached a bottleneck given my talent. Even with a breakthrough in inner energy, I would still need to gain enlightenment in the sword arts to see any impact in my martial skill. Therefore, I do not have a strong need for this pill, and would like to give it to eldest brother. What do you think?”

First elder Hu pondered deeply.

Then Ou Peng said, “Eldest brother, do we know if this Qi strengthening pill can be split and consumed separately? The records in our library have no mention of this.”

First elder Hu opened the jade boxes and welcomed the refreshing scent. He pressed it against his hands, and could feel that it was rather solid. The, he closed the box.

Second elder Li saw his actions and said, “Eldest brother, we better not take such a risk, I will consume the Qi improving pill instead. If the Qi strengthening pill cannot be split, then we would be wasting such a precious supplement.”

First elder Hu asked, “Old second, were you stating the truth just now? We have not trained in the swords, so do not lie to me.”

Second elder Li replied, "Of course."

First elder Hu took out a small exquisite dagger from his breast, reopened the jade box, and said, "How could twenty years of training be compared to our brotherhood between us? Even though old second is willing to yield this benefit to eldest brother, how can eldest brother take away old second's rare opportunity? I shall use our brotherhood to gamble on this pill. After all, what do I have to fear?"

Second elder Li's eyes turned watery, with complex emotions in his body language as he walked over and said "Eldest brother....."

The rest of the people all stood up and walked forward.

First elder Hu patted second elder Li's shoulders, passed him the dagger and said, "Old second, your expertise is in the sword. It is your call now."

Second elder Li received the dagger, felt the warmth on its handle, and looked at first elder Hu's encouraging expression as he smiled and sliced towards the jade box.

Everyone only saw a streak of blade light, and as the dagger landed on the Qi strengthening pill, a line drew across right in its middle, otherwise seemingly unchanged. Ou Peng then hurriedly took out another jade box to store the halves of the pill separately.

Then, first elder Hu kept one of the boxes in his breast, and handed the other to second elder Li. Of course, the completely whole pill was given to fourth elder Shangguan.

After the Qi strengthening pills were distributed, it was now fifth elder Liu and sixth elder Xu's turns to receive the bone reinforcing pill.

Because there were three pills in the Qi strengthening pill bottle, everyone was less anxious about the quantity of bone reinforcing pills. Still, first elder Hu asked both men on their opinions should there be only one pill.

Fifth elder Liu replied, "Of course it should be given to old sixth. He is the youngest, don't we usually leave the best things to him?"

Sixth elder Xu countered, "It was like this before, but not his time. I have taken

my fair share of benefits for half my life, so this pill should definitely be given to fifth brother.”

The two men pushed and pull, each not receding to use the pill for themselves.

Finally, fifth elder Liu said, “Eldest brother, just open the bottle now. Weren’t there three pills in the previous bottle? If there are also three pills in this one, that what is the point of all this banter?”

Thus, first elder Hu did not hesitate any longer and uncorked the bottle, pouring its contents into a jade box.

Indeed, there were also three pills.

Everyone sighed in relief.

First elder Hu put the three pills into separate jade boxes, and gave one box to fifth elder Liu and sixth elder Xu each, which they kept into their breast.

He then passed the last box back to Ou Peng and said, “Third junior brother, the last box is for you to determine who to give it to.”

Ou Peng nodded and accepted the jade box, and placed it on the table instead of keeping it into his breast.

Chapter 29: Consuming the pill

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Consuming the pill

Ou Peng looked at the bone reinforcing pill on the table, and said, "This pill is only suitable for external martial arts practitioners, I plan to give it to Shi Niu, what do you all think?"

After finishing his sentence, Ou Peng looked towards fifth elder Liu and sixth elder Xu, because only the two of them were external martial arts practitioners.

Fifth elder Liu generously said, "Okay, I approve. Shi Niu has unordinary strength, and is even stronger than me. If he consumes the pill, it will definitely boost the strength of our sect."

Sixth elder Xu pondered for a moment, and said, "I have no objections. Those disciples of mine have limited talents, and none are as good as Shi Niu. However, Shi Niu is too simple-minded so you will have to control him better."

Ou Peng nodded and replied, "I have confidence in this."

First elder Hu looked at the jade bottle with the Qi improving pills, and said, "It will be up to third junior brother to decide on the distribution of these Qi improving pills. If any of our disciples have some potential, they should be entitled to one, if not, we will not distribute any to them."

Ou Peng smiled and said, "I will follow eldest senior brother's suggestion. The number of herbs we have obtained this time is quite limited, so I will distribute them accordingly to the abilities of our disciples. From what little Hai and Qing'er have said, there are still many more of such herbs in the secret area. Furthermore, we already have its location, so there should be a never-ending supply of such herbs in the future. Everyone can be at ease; our personal disciples should be able to receive their share."

First elder Hu smiled and said, “That would be for the best. We cannot let these pills spoil the harmony and comradery of our sect. In addition, we should reward little Hai and Qing’er for their efforts appropriately.”

Ou Peng replied, “En, my thoughts alike. I will pass one Qi improving pill to them each later on.”

First elder Hu said, “This is not urgent. Since we have taken our share of the Qi strengthening pill and bone reinforcing pill, I think that we should consume them first before discussing anything else.”

Ou Peng said, “Eldest brother is right. The records in our library state that we would require a full day to absorb the benefits of the pill. What do you all think if we enter the secret training room now?”

First elder Hu replied, “Okay, you can settle the sect affairs first, then call Shi Niu over and we can enter closed door training together.”

Ou Peng then called his first disciple Zhang Chengyue into the room, gave him some instructions, and not long after, a sleepy-eyed Shi Niu entered the discussion hall without realizing that a biscuit has dropped from the heavens into his hands.

There was a secret hidden door at the back of the discussion hall which lead to a long pathway, and the pathway was lit by burning torches on its sides. On first sight, the pathway appeared to be endless.

Ou Peng led everyone into the door and through the pathway, and after walking for the time it takes to boil a kettle of tea, they reached a large hall which was furnished with chairs and tables, as well as several doors that led to other places, if one raised his head, he would notice that the ceiling was quite open, about four to five zhang high, and from the patterns of the rocks, one could discern that he was in the belly of the mountain.

Ou Peng handed the jade box which contained the bone reinforcing pill to Shi Niu, pointed towards a door and said, “Go in, find a small room and consume this pill. Then, train as per norm for (nineXnine) eighty one times.”

Shi Niu received the jade box and walked towards the door without questions.

The others went to their own respective doors, found a small room, and

entered closed door cultivation.

After Ou Peng found his room, he sat down with his legs crossed and circulated the Piaomiao's martial art for one full round to adjust his mental state. Then, he took out the jade box from his breast, opened it and felt the refreshing scent waft up his nose, observed its pitch black appearance and solid texture which was completely unlike the Qi improving pills produced by his sect, and put it into his mouth. He felt a fluid like substance flowing on his tongue down his throat, which turned into a sort of warmth as it entered his body before coagulating inside his dantian.

At this moment, Ou Peng set aside his thoughts and focused his attention on activating the Piaomiao martial art to refine this warmth. Only silence permeated throughout the secret chamber.

After an unknown period of time passed, Ou Peng stopped cultivating and inspected his body, before feeling elated; the Qi strengthening pill truly deserved its reputation. Not only was his inner energy thicker, the true Qi flowed more smoothly through his meridians. From his estimation, he had circulated his Qi for exactly (nineXnine) eighty one times, and he thought to himself, "A heavenly pill indeed."

Since Ou Peng has been sitting all this while, he finally got up, opened the door and entered the common hall. At this moment, first elder Hu, second elder Li, fourth elder Shangguan were already waiting inside.

Ou Peng stepped forwards and asked first elder Hu, "Eldest brother, how was it?"

First elder Hu replied with a smile, "It was indeed a legendary item. It saved me ten years worth of training."

Upon hearing this, Ou Peng sent his congratulations.

Then, Ou Peng asked second elder Li on his harvest. Second elder Lin did not reply verbally, but he responded with a flick of his sword and upon seeing a cun length of sword light from the sword, Ou Peng became ecstatic and he sent his congratulations again.

Fourth elder Shangguan did not wait for Ou Peng to question him, he

immediately said, "Third brother, my inner energy has increased to almost twice it was before, this pill is truly wondrous. What about you?"

Ou Peng smiled and replied "I was fortunate. My Piaomiao martial art has more than doubled, and has crossed over the large accomplishment stage."

Fourth elder Shangguan exclaimed in admiration.

After half a bell worth of time, fifth elder Liu, sixth elder Xu and Shi Niu has not left their chambers yet, and fourth elder Shangguan could not help but began to worry. Ou Peng said, "We probably have nothing to worry about. Inner energy is required to circulate for inner energy martial arts, but for external martial arts, they will have to refine their bones and flesh, so perhaps it requires more time."

The people in the hall waited for two meal worth of time, before suddenly hearing unrestrained laughter from one of the stone rooms. Fifth elder pushed his door open, and his thick heavy frame has noticeably grown skinnier, while the two axes in his hands appear to be lighter for him. As he strode across the hall, his steps were light unlike before, so there were no doubt that his martial skills had improved.

In the next moment, another door opened, and sixth elder Xu walked out. There was no visible change in his physical appearance, but when he walked closer, everyone noticed temples region had a slight protrusion, whereas his hands has turned fairer and they gave off the feeling of white jade. Thus, everyone could guess that he had made some progress in his external martial arts.

When the six tigers of Piaomiao met each other again, they congratulated each other on their martial skills breakthrough.

Only Shi Niu in the last stone room has yet to come out.

Everyone felt that it was strange.

Ou Peng walked towards the stone room where Shi Niu was cultivating, and as he strained his ears, he heard the sounds of wind impact followed by Shi Niu's heavy breathing; apparently, the latter was still in training.

Ou Peng looked at fifth elder Liu and sixth elder Xu, and wondered in his heart, "Old fifth and old sixth has already came out, could this Shi Niu's martial art be

even more profound? And thus has not completed his training?”

After another half bell worth of time, Ou Peng went over to listen again, but there was no change in the situation.

Ou Peng wondered in his heart, could this mark the birth of another top martial art expert in Piaomiao?

Yet another meal worth of time passed, and Ou Peng could no longer control his patience, so he opened the door slightly and peeked inside. In front of him was Shi Niu who was still practicing his Adamantyl hands. Each fist carried the force of wind, and after a while, he heard Shi Niu shouting “Seventy eight.” Then, he began all over from the first stance, but at this moment, Shi Niu noticed Ou Peng, and he said without halting his movements, “Sect master, please wait a little longer. I have just finished the seventy eighth repetition, and will be hitting eight one soon.” Each word was spoken with clarity, and his breathing was even without any sign of exertion, and his movements were not affected. Without thirty to fifty years of hard training, it would be impossible for him to achieve such a stage.

Thus, Ou Peng returned back to the hall and continued to chat idly while waiting for Shi Niu to complete all eighty one repetitions.

As everyone was standing in the hall, their legs began to ache and if not for the earlier miracle, they would have turned irate. Right at that moment, the door finally opened.

When Shi Niu walked out, his body appeared to be larger than before by a third, and there was even some faint luminescence on his skin, while his presence has grown more majestic, giving off the impression of a giant spirit.

Seeing Ou Peng, Shi Niu asked excitedly, “Sect master, what was the thing you gave me? How could it be so fragrant, and even tastier than ten bowls of rice? On usual days, I would be drenched in sweat from practicing Adamantyl hands for three rounds, but today, I still do not feel tired after completing eighty one repetitions. I even feel like I have excess energy to train for a while more.”

Everyone laughed in their hearts.

Ou Peng asked, “Shi Niu, how does your martial skill now compare from

before?”

Shi Niu scratched his head, and said, “I don’t know. It feels like I am stronger than before. I could kill a bull in the past, but I think I can kill a bear now.”

Fifth elder Liu stepped forward and said, “Shi Niu, use your full strength to hit me.”

Upon hearing his instruction, Shi Niu did not hesitate and struck out a punch. Fifth elder Liu also raised his palms to welcome the strike while planning to use eighty percent of his full strength, but as the fist got closer and the force of the fist blew towards him, he became shocked and changed to execute his full strength.

Seeing the two men colliding towards each other, with a “Ping” sound, Shi Niu took one step back while creating a deep impression on the floor, while fifth elder Liu took five consecutive steps back leaving his footprints on the floor with each step.

Holding his slightly sore fist, fifth elder Liu walked to Shi Niu and said, “You little rascal, your progress is really huge. I am afraid that I am not your opponent anymore.”

Upon hearing the compliment, Shi Niu smiled naively.

Sixth elder Xu who was at a side said, “Fifth brother is too humble, Shi Niu trains in his fist but you train with an axe. I am afraid that he is not a match for your axe.”

Fifth elder patted on Shi Niu’s sculpture-like muscles and said, “I naturally know that. Come, Shi Niu, let’s get a drink.”

Then, he pulled Shi Niu as they walked back towards the long pathway.

Chapter 30: Familiar relations

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Familiar relations

Seeing the disappearing backs of the two men, Ou Peng shook his head and said, “Those two clowns sure are hard to handle.”

First elder Hu smiled and said, “Just let them go.”

Then, everyone followed the two as they left the common hall.

As they entered the discussion hall again, it was already nightfall. Ou Peng and the rest wondered in their hearts; the records in the library were right that it takes one full day to absorb the benefits of the pill, and the difference between their current strength and before was like heaven and earth.

After everyone took their seats, Zhang Chengyue came forward and gave his greetings, before reporting a summary of the affairs of the sect during this period of time. Ou Peng listened to his report, nodded in satisfaction, and Zhang Chengyue automatically stood aside.

Ou Peng did not drag the meeting, he informed everyone that he will be entering closed door cultivation for the next ten days, all the sect matters will thus be left to Zhang Chengyue. Then, he dismissed everyone else.

After the people from the sect left, the five of six of the Piaomiao tigers continued their discussion.

Ou Peng told his fellow peers, “Fellow brothers, we have already refined the pills from the secret area. After we return, it is best if we rest for ten days to stabilize our inner growth. After ten days, we can meet again to discuss the plan to expand Piaomiao’s influence. What do you think?”

No one had any objections, so they got up and return to their respective

homes.

That night in Piaomiao sect was no different from other ordinary nights, except one minor thing. After dinner that night, a maid walked out of a chamber and casually left the mountain villa to a nearby grocery shop in the outskirts to buy some rouge before returning to the sect. After she left the shop, the owner of the shop continued to tend the shop for a meal worth of time, before leaving for Pingyang city via a carriage, where he unloaded some goods in a larger grocer in the city before rushing back to Piaomiao's mountain villa.

A man in the accounts room of the larger grocer in Pingyang city finished his books, then went back home. On his way back, he passed by a dark alley, and with an anxious expression, he turned into the alley. After he entered, he did not urinate, but instead head towards a corner where a small door was located, knocked on the door a few times, and the door creaked open to reveal a person's head peeking out. Upon seeing the visitor, he hurriedly welcomed him in, and not long after, the accountant went back out, urinated in the alley, and lazily walked out before returning home. Just as he walked out of the alley, two courier pigeons flew out of the house which he entered previously, and eventually they flew out of Pingyang city.

Even though Pingyang city was noisy as usual that night, just like nothing unordinary had happened in Piaomiao sect mountain villa, and the two pigeons did not seem to have any impact on either of them, who knows what undercurrent lies underneath this scene of normalcy?

Dawn soon arrived. The first rays of sunlight struck through the darkness of the night, and everyone began to wake up to continue their routine for the day.

Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes, and as usual, a glimmer of light appeared in his pupils and was not noticed by anyone.

After Zhang Xiaohua woke up, the first sound he heard was of his grandmother coughing. Zhang Xiaohua did not have to concentrate to recall that this is the eighth consecutive day since she began to cough. Furthermore, he felt that this cough was not as simple as it appears to be. He could feel with every cough that his grandmother is coughing out bits of her life force, and that her remaining vitality is slowly withering after every day. Zhang Xiaohua was afraid, but he dare

not inform his mother because apart from the cough, there did not seem to be any problem with his grandmother's body. Her appetite did not decrease, and the village doctor has diagnosed it to be a common cold which would recover as the weather turns warmer.

However, Zhang Xiaohua did not believe his diagnosis.

His grandmother suddenly threw another fit of coughs, and her waist even bent from pain this time round. Zhang Xiaohua immediately got up to rub her back, and then poured some water from the kettle on the table, checked its temperature, and helped his grandmother drink it. After his grandmother drank the water, she then breathed deeply, and said tenderly, "Xiaohua, why did you wake up so early? Why don't you sleep a little longer, did grandmother wake you up?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "No, grandmother. I do not know why but recently, I have been waking up immediately after daybreak, and cannot fall back to sleep thereafter."

The grandmother replied, "Ah, Xiaohua has grown up and is sensible enough. Grandmother also did not want to wake you up, and has been bearing it throughout the night, but since daybreak came, I could not control myself and coughed out loud. Tomorrow, grandmother will go out to the courtyard so you will not be disturbed."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Grandmother, it is true, I am not lying. I have been sleeping very well in the night, and had not heard you cough yet. You must definitely not go outside, it is too cold outdoors."

His grandmother smiled and did not say anything else.

Zhang Xiaohua left the room and looked at the sun which was beginning to rise. The sun was not too glaring, it was yellow like a duck egg and rather cute looking, so Zhang Xiaohua playfully opened his mouth and pretended to take a bite off it, and he suddenly felt something hot flow down into his throat and into his body.

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, but he immediately became suspicious of what he felt. Not believing it to be true, he shook his head and proceeded to wash his face.

The courtyard was the same as usual; his mother and Liu Qing was already awake, the former was feeding the household's poultry and the latter was making breakfast. Zhang Xiaohua was happy to see this scene and he felt as though Liu Qing was not an elder sister Liu Qing but a sister-in-law instead. He had already made his mind, even though he could not share his suspicion of his grandmother's illness with his mother, he would discuss it with the knowledgeable sister-in-law-to-be.

A farmer household's breakfast is usually a simple affair, and everyone would hurriedly chomp it down before returning to their work. However, one thing was different these days. After Zhang Xiaohua finished his meal, he would go up to the hills to draw some well water. Ever since that night when the family gathered together to drink tea, they fell in love with its taste and would want to drink it every morning. Furthermore, they feel that the water from the well was more delicious than the usual river water, and thus would wait longingly for the spring water to arrive after their meal. However, Zhang Cai was cautious about drawing too much attention so he only allowed Zhang Xiaohua to draw water twice a day, and forbade him from telling the other villagers.

Zhang Xiaohua went to draw the water after his meal.

Before he left, he asked Liu Qing, "Elder sister Liu, would you like to go up to the hill with me?"

Guo Sufei overheard his invitation, and said happily, "Yes, Liu Qing, you should go out and take a break. These days have been hard on you."

The other Zhang family members all agreed that it was a good idea, so Liu Qing pondered a while before putting down the chopsticks that she was cleaning, and said, "Then I would have to trouble auntie to clean up for me. I will be going out now for a walk."

Then, Liu Qing followed behind Zhang Xiaohua as they walked towards the river.

When Zhang Xiaohua reached the riverside, he did not continue walking. Liu Qing chased after him and asked, "Xiaohua, do you have something to discuss with me?"

Zhang Xiaohua forced a smile and said, "Elder sister Liu, you sure are smart to

be able to guess my intentions.”

Liu Qing replied, “Little rascal, just tell me about it. Elder sister will think about it with you.”

Zhang Xiaohua turned quiet for a moment, before looking towards the flowing river as he asked, “Elder sister Liu, do you think that it is possible for people to live forever?”

Liu Qing wrinkled her brows and said, “I cannot really answer your question. Some books say that every person will die one day, and the graveyard is the final destination of all people; yet other books say that while most ordinary people will die, a small portion of people do not.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “What kind of people do not die?”

Liu Qing replied, “According to some unofficial historical records, there are cultivators who do not need to eat or live in warmth, and are able to live forever. However, these are only written in the text and no one has met with any of such immortals before. Thus, no one can ascertain the authenticity of such records, whereas there is evidence of death everywhere.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “If someone is dying, how do we resuscitate them?”

Liu Qing wrinkled her eyebrows and said, “If someone is dying of illness, then the solution would be to find a doctor to treat the illness. If it is due to poison, then the victim has to be fed the antidote. If the person is dying of old age, then... oh right, you can feed them the ‘longevity extending pill’. I have read a very old book when I was young, and it wrote of miracle pills, one of which is the ‘longevity extending pill’ which can allow a person to live for twenty more years. However, this is likely to be untrue, because no one has heard of a person who had consumed such a pill.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard up to this point, he looked towards the flowing water in the river as he muttered, “Where can I find this longevity extending pill?”

Upon hearing him, Liu Qing was confused and she asked, “Xiaohua, why did you ask such weird questions today? Are you going to look for the longevity pill?”

Zhang Xiaohua raised his head, and his lips quivered as though he was about to cry. His voice turned hoarse as he said, “Elder sister Liu, I feel that our grandmother is leaving us soon. She is going to pass away soon.”

Liu Qing felt her heart jumped, and she hurried walked towards Zhang Xiaohua and hugged his head, “Xiaohua, be a good boy, do not cry. Do not let your thoughts run wild, grandmother is only suffering from a common cough, since old people fall sick more easily. Hasn’t the doctor said this? When the weather turns warmer, you grandmother will turn better.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s tears began to roll as he said, “But Old Chen is an animal doctor, he would not know how to diagnose human illness.”

Liu Qing hurriedly consoled Zhang Xiaohua, “Then a few days later, we will bring grandmother to the town to find a famous doctor alright? Grandmother will definitely be fine.”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head as he continued to cry. He cried as he spoke, “Elder sister Liu, stop lying to me. I am not young anymore, and I can farm on my own land. I know that grandmother is not getting any better; I can feel that there is something sticky in her body that is preventing her from breathing well, which is the reason for her cough. Furthermore, I can feel something in grandmother’s body that is escaping into the air every day, and it is becoming thinner and thinner.”

Upon hearing this, Liu Qing was also upset, and could no longer console Zhang Xiaohua. He is really a sensible and obedient boy, and only someone with thick affection and love would be able to feel the flow of life. Liu Qing hugged Zhang Xiaohua’s head tightly, as tears began to fall from her eyes as well.

Chapter 31: Illness

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Illness

After half a bell worth of time, Liu Qing finally stopped her tears.

She pointed towards the river and said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Xiaohua, look at the river. It began as a tiny stream, then flowed into the creek, which flowed into the river, which eventually grow wider and wider until it flowed into the sea. Just like us humans, the water has a path to follow, and its destination is the large open sea. If the river stopped flowing, what do you think will happen to it? It will become still, and smelly, and lose the meaning of its life. People are the same, we have to go through our birth, growth and death. That is the full meaning of life. I do not know much about those immortals, but for ordinary people like us, growing old and falling sick is part of life, and is a melody in a song.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “Why can’t we live forever?”

Liu Qing replied, “Because we don’t know how to.”

She then continued to explain, “Look at grandmother, she is already over eighty years old. After going through so much storms in her life, from when she first learnt to speak, grew up, met your grandfather, formed her family and had your mother, up till when she watched your mother meet your father, and even see her grandchildren; she has already lived the full cycle of life, and should not have many regrets left. Thus, you should feel happy for her. Eighty years of life is more than what most people could have.”

Zhang Xiaohua raised his head and asked, “Then what should I do?”

Liu Qing stroke Xiaohua’s head and said, “What you need to do right now, is to pack your feelings aside and spend meaningful time with your grandmother, to let her enjoy her last moments in life beside her grandchildren, so that she will not have any regrets before she leaves.”

The darkness in Zhang Xiaohua's heart slowly began to dissipate, and a smile appeared across his face she said, "Elder sister Liu, you sure know many things, and can explain them well so that even I can understand. If I were to tell these to my mother, she would surely hit me and say that I should not accommodate such thoughts."

Liu Qing replied, "Everyone has their own way of expressing their thoughts. Your mother would do so because it is her way to tell you not to think too much, I am simply telling you the same thing in a different way. If you find it easier to understand, then you can turn to me for any other matters in the future."

Zhang Xiaohua mischievously added, "Of course, I will have many things to tell elder sister in the future."

Liu Qing said, "Mischievous rascal, lets hurry and draw the water. The sun is going to be high up in the sky soon, and your mother is going to nag again."

Zhang Xiaohua stuck out his tongue and said, "Then let's hurry. However, with you around, mother will definitely not blame me for going back late."

Although he said that, Zhang Xiaohua still rushed to draw the water from the well, because it seems that his grandmother enjoys drinking the water from there.

In the following days, grandmother's illness seemed to deteriorate even further, and she began to cough out blood. Just as Zhang Xiaohua had said, her illness was not an ordinary cold. At this time, Guo Sufei started to worry, she did not bother to complain to Old Chen, nor did she bother to take care of the injured family members. Instead, she hurriedly found a donkey wagon to bring her to the town to see a doctor. Zhang Xiaohua insisted in going along, but was forced to stay at home by his mother. As the head of the household, Zhang Cai naturally wanted to follow as well, and even though his leg was still injured, he could take the chance to see the doctor as well. Since there was limited space in the wagon, they had to leave this youngest, most doted grandson in home.

The horse carriage left early in the morning, so Zhang Xiaohua helped Liu Qing to look after his two injured elder brothers and do some housework. However, his mind was always on his grandmother, and he often sneaked glances to outside. Even though Liu Qing wanted to tell the three brothers that their

grandmother will only arrive by nightfall, on seeing the anxious looks on their faces, she bit her tongue and silently did the rest of the housework.

Time just passed like that, and the sky outside slowly turned dark. Finally, Zhang Xiaohua saw the wagon which was carrying his grandmother back. He immediately jumped off his chair, ignored his two elder brothers, and rushed out of the house. In his hurry, he tripped over a stool, but he still left the house while ignoring the mess.

When he reached the entrance of the courtyard, the wagon has also arrived. The driver got off his seat, led the donkey to take a few steps forward, and tied it to the courtyard entrance.

There were three people wearing thick clothing while sitting at the back although their faces could not be seen clearly. Even before the wagon was stabilized to a halt, Zhang Xiaohua heard a deep cough and he hurtfully walked to the wagon and called “Grandmother~”. Unfortunately, his grandmother was still coughing uncontrollably and could not answer him.

Guo Sufei got off the wagon first, before asking Zhang Xiaohu who had just arrived to help support Zhang Cai down. Then, Zhang Xiaohua and Li Qing carefully helped the grandmother who had finished coughing down as well.

After Zhang Cai paid the wagon driver, the wagon sped off leaving the family standing there by themselves.

Liu Qing and Zhang Xiaohua helped the grandmother who was coughing on the way back into the house. While hearing her coughs, Zhang Xiaohua felt as if his heart has shattered. On the way, the grandmother said with difficulty, “Let’s go to the common room first, so that I can spend more time with you.”

Hence, the two brought her to her common room.

Guo Sufei looked out of her spirits as she walked behind, followed by Zhang Xiaohu who was supporting Zhang Cai, and finally Zhang Xiaolong who still had his clutch on in front of his chest.

The common room was not large, the atmosphere became stuffy, not to mention that everyone did not have a space to sit.

At this moment, the grandmother burst into another fit of coughs, and Liu

Qing hurriedly poured a warm cup of water for her.

Liu Qing wanted to speak up to break the silence, but she did not know what to say.

Finally, the grandmother said, "The doctor in the town sure is not ordinarily cheap. Sufei-ah, we should not go there again. Each visit actually costs one silver, our family would have to take a long time to save that amount of money."

Guo Sufei forced a smile and replied, "Look at what you are saying, mother. If you are sick, then you should see the doctor. Even if our family is poor, we cannot save on this money."

The grandmother then continued, "I know in my heart what illness I have, and a doctor will be of no use. I already told you that I did not want to go, but you still insisted and wasted a good silver."

At this moment, Guo Sufei's eyes turned red, and she said, "Mother, you do not need to worry about us. Didn't Zhang Cai go to see the doctor as well, we brought you along was because it was on the way."

The grandmother took another deep breath, sipped on some water, and did not speak anymore, finally allowing Zhang Xiaohua to bring her back to her room.

When Zhang Xiaohua returned to the common room, his mother was crying softly while whipping her tears. His father was dejectedly taking a smoke, while his elder brothers and Liu Qing did not have a good expression on their faces as well.

Zhang Xiaohua already knew that his grandmother's health was not in a good situation, so he did not ask about the doctor's diagnosis and silently sat on a stool at one side.

After half a bell worth of time, Guo Sufei finally recovered some of her composure, and stopped crying. Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua has returned, she asked, "Xiaohua, has your grandmother fallen asleep?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head, "Yes, mother. Grandmother is probably tired, she fell asleep as soon as she laid on the platform."

Guos Sufei turned her head and asked Zhang Cai, “Children’s father, what do you think we should do? Should we go to a better doctor in the city?”

Zhnag Cai puffed heavily on his smoke, closed his eyes and said, “Sigh, did you not hear what the doctor said Mother’s illness is not an ordinary cough, but is due to old age and her body is unable to support itself anymore, so there is no treatment for her. Furthermore, can her body hold out during the trip to the city? The nearest city from here is Pingyang city, and even that is one full day’s worth of journey on horse.”

Guo Sufei became slightly more emotional again, and whimpered, “Then we should just watch her body fail bit by bit? And hear her cough like this every day?”

Zhang Cai laughed bitterly and said, “We do not have any other choice. Hasn’t the doctor said, someone as old as mother is already rare to find. For an eighty year old lady, our mother’s body is already considered healthy. I think we should follow his advice and let her rest well, eat well, and enjoy the rest of her time.”

Guo Sufei was also helpless, she knew that her mother has reached the end of her life, but she still harbored some hope in her heart, and would rather drag her to see different doctors from everywhere. However, in the face of the cruel reality, how much use is does hoping have?

Guo Sufei stared blankly at the little flame in the oil lamp as though deep in thought, and suddenly, she asked Zhang Cai, “Oh right, children’s father, the doctor talked about the thing mother ate. Why do I not know of it?”

Hearing her sentence, Zhang Cai raised his head and looked helplessly at Guo Sufei.

Everyone would not help but ask in unison, “What thing?”

Zhang Cai took another puff on his pipe and said “In the medicinal hall, the doctor already diagnosed your grandmother and said that he could not treat her. However, after your mother pleaded non-stop, he took another close look, and noticed that despite your grandmother’s poor condition, there was something nourishing her body from within, although it was not much. He said that it is probably because she ate ginseng or something equally nourishing recently.”

The whole household was dumbfounded, ginseng? How could the family afford something like that?

Chapter 32: Well water

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Well water

Zhang Cai said, "It is definitely not ginseng, I have seen it once when I was young at a medicinal hall before I came to Guo village, and I have never seen it ever since."

Everyone grew increasingly curious, what could it be? Every meal was eaten from the same pot, and all they had was the common dishes farmers ate; there was nothing special about the food at all.

Everyone was dumbfounded.

However, the night was getting late, and Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei were tired from the travelling, so then everyone went back to their respective rooms.

Zhang Xiaohua crept back into the room he shared with the grandmother. The grandmother was already asleep, and despite the occasional cough, she did not notice Zhang Xiaohua when he entered. Zhang Xiaohua snuggled into his sheets and was getting ready to sleep, but on hearing the persistent coughs, his heart began to ache. The sounds of her coughs made him recall the many times his grandmother had treated him well in the past. Although he had always taken her for granted, but at this moment, he realized that every simple act or gesture of hers in their previous interactions was filled with tenderness and love.

As he recalled more of his memories, Zhang Xiaohua began to cry, and the tears covered his face and dripped onto his pillow. Slowly, he began to fall asleep and entered the bright, flickering dreamland.

The Zhang Xiaohua in his dreamland was like another lifeform. In this bright flickering world, his breath, his body, and his entire being would seem to match the rhythm of the flickers, as if he was merging with the dream world.

On the morning of the second day, Zhang Xiaohua immediately woke up when the first sunlight enters the grandmother's room, and again, a flicker of light would appear in the pupils of his eyes.

The first thing Zhang Xiaohua heard when he opened his eyes were the sounds of his grandmother. However, they were not the sounds of her coughs. Zhang Xiaohua immediately got up and realized that she was not in the room. As he got off the bed and exited the room, he found her sitting on a chair in the courtyard. The morning breeze was still very chilly, and it blew the white hair on the grandmother's head which dazed Zhang Xiaohua's eyes momentarily.

He quickly ran out and said, "Grandmother, come back into the room quickly. The morning wind is very cold, your body is originally not healthy so you should stay indoors in the morning."

The grandmother stroke Zhang Xiaohua's head and said tenderly, "Xiaohua, your grandmother is very old so she is unable to sleep, which is why I came out to enjoy the wind. I will go back in now, okay?"

Zhang Xiaohua did not reply, and he silently supported her back into the warmth of the room.

As he left the room and walked into the courtyard, Zhang Xiaohua saw the rising sun and was reminded of something unusual a few days ago. Thus, he repeated his motions and pretended to take a bite off the sun, and indeed, he had not mistaken the feeling of something hot flow down his throat into his body. Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he rolled his eyes and wondered if this was related to the 'sky dog eating the sun'? If so, then had he turned into a sky dog? After thinking for a while, he shook his head and left the idea at the back of his head. Instead, he decided to commit to this action every morning to see what would happen eventually.

After his breakfast, Zhang Xiaohua went back up to the hills to draw the spring water.

Just as he was about to leave, Liu Qing who was in the midst of keeping the bowls said aloud, "I figured out what grandmother ate."

Everyone was surprised; Zhang Cai asked curiousl, "What do you mean about what she ate?"

Liu Qing smiled and answered, "Yesterday, hadn't the doctor say that grandmother had eaten ginseng or something similar?"

Zhang Cai understood, and Zhang Xiaolong asked urgently, "What is it? What on earth did grandmother eat?" Zhang Xiaohua also stopped in his tracks to listen to the conversation.

Liu Qing mysteriously answered, "It is not what she ate, but rather what she had drunk."

"Drink?" When Zhang Xiaolong heard the word, his eyes turned towards Zhang Xiaohua as though he realized something.

Zhang Xiaohu had yet to finish his breakfast at that moment. He stared at his watery porridge and asked, "This? This is as good as ginseng? I don't think so."

Liu Qing saw that she had made everyone anxious so she explained, "Look everyone, didn't we brainstorm for a long time last night and yet could not find out anything special? However, the doctor said that the thing was eaten recently, and this spring water was only drunk occasionally in the past. Our habits changed after I came, we have since drunken large quantities of the water. This is especially the case for grandmother who seems to enjoy drinking the tea a lot. We have also started cooking our rice with the spring water recently as well. If we were to follow the timeline, then this spring water is the only thing that fits the criteria."

Guo Sufei patted her head and said, "Oh yes, all we thought of last night was the food, we never thought about the water we drank. Liu Qing might have struck the nail on its forehead."

Zhang Cai countered, "I would believe if you say that our mother was nourished by ginseng. But spring water? No matter how delicious, it is only water, how can it be a substitute for medicine?"

Liu Qing did not know how to answer and so she replied, "Uncle, I am not sure. Shall we take a kettle of water and show it to the town doctor?"

Guo Sufei replied, "En, that is a good idea. Why don't we let Xiaohu take a kettle of water and run to the doctor?"

Zhang Xiaohu said excitedly, "Alright, I will finish my meal and prepare

immediately. My injuries are almost fully recovered so running some distance will not be a problem.”

Zhang Xiaohua also said, “Then I shall draw some water immediately. I want to follow second brother to town too later.”

After he finished his sentence, he prepared to run up the hill.

At this moment, Zhang Cai shouted aloud, “No, don’t go!”

Everyone was surprised. Guo Sufei asked, “The head of our household, what do you mean? Why won’t you let Xiaohu and him go?”

Zhang Cai saw the confused expression of everyone’s faces, and smiled bitterly, “Have you forgotten about what happened to Mr. Wu?”

Right at that moment, Liu Qing and Zhang Xiaohua understood Zhang Cai’s intentions, while the rest of the household was still befuddled. Zhang Xiaohu asked, “Father, of course we are aware of Mr. Wu’s matter, his family was killed by the mountain bandits because of a treasure that he had dug up.”

Zhang Cai asked, “Then is the water in our well a treasure as well?”

Zhang Xiaohu answered, “We don’t know, which is why we are need to check with the doctor.”

Zhang Cai continued to ask, “And what if it is?”

Zhang Xiaohu turned dumb, not knowing how to reply.

Liu Qing saw that everyone was still confused, so she explained, “What uncle meant is if this well water turned out to be a treasure and the doctor in Lu town learns about it, then he will covet it just like how the mountain bandits found out about Mr. Wu’s treasure. Since this well is in the hills and not within our courtyard, we cannot put our claim on it. Then, other people would come to draw water from this well, and once all the water is drawn, what can grandmother drink? In the worst case scenario, if someone has enough power to claim the well and prevent others from using it, then how do we draw any more spring water?”

Everyone then understood the problem.

Zhang Xiaolong asked, “If we do not show it to the doctor, how do we know if

the spring water is beneficial to grandmother?”

Liu Qing smiled and answered, “We should not show the water to the doctor for now. Whether or not we check with the doctor if this spring water has beneficial properties, we will still use it to make tea and cook rice. Thus, is there still a need to go to the doctor?”

Then, she continued in a serious tone, “If this spring water is indeed special, and the doctor learns about it, then we, grandmother included, will not be able to drink the water.”

Guo Sufei hurriedly said, “Liu Qing is right, we cannot bring this to the doctor in town. In this world, human’s hearts are unpredictable. Whatever we do, we should protect our self-interest first and foremost.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head while he went to draw more water, repeating the earlier words in his heart, “In this world, human’s hearts are unpredictable. Whatever we do, we should protect our self-interest first and foremost. Sigh, it is so difficult to live as a human.”

Since that day, Zhang Xiaohua would go up to the hills to draw another bucket of water. All the water in the household, whether it was for eating, drinking, or washing, was replaced with water from the well.

Everyone hoped with all their hearts that a miracle would occur to the grandmother.

However, the grandmother’s body continued to stay weak, and her coughing did not ease up.

On the other hand, Zhang Cai, Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu’s injuries all healed at an incredible pace. Especially in the case of Zhang Xiaolong, on his first trip to reapply the medicine, Old Chen could not believe his eyes and touched him again and again. However, the fact that Zhang Xiaolong has recovered halfway was right before his eyes. He completely ignored Guo Sufei’s profuse thanks, and hurried them out of his house to check the medicine he applied on Zhang Xiaolong. With such effective medicine, why would he still need to stay as an animal doctor? He could already move to Lu town and open a pharmacy shop.

Wouldn't he strike rich just from selling this medicine?"

Everyone in the household could see the speed of recovery in Xiaolong's injuries, and they all felt extremely happy, thinking that the well water was indeed special. When the grandmother learned about Zhang Xiaolong's fast recovery pace, a smile blossomed on her face. Even her coughs grew less frequent after then, and the whole household celebrated in joy.

As for Liu Qing, she was confused by her own feelings. When she first saw Zhang Xiaolong returned without the clutches, she felt happy with the whole family, but disappointed later on. Even though she had tried to avoid the thought in her head, she knew that she liked this family, and she liked Zhang Xiaolong as a man. Thus, she was unwilling to leave here and return home. Was my own home lacking? She asked herself, and the answer was no. She liked her family, but she felt a different type of emotion when staying in the Zhang household.

Perhaps, it was because of Zhang Xiaolong.

However, Zhang Xiaolong has recovered, so what other reason did she have to stay?

Chapter 33: Choice

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Choice

That night, the atmosphere in the Zhang household was even more vibrant than during the New Year.

The weight on everyone's mind has finally been lifted, so during dinner, Zhang Cai drank some bowls of wine to toast to his son's recovery. After the meal, everyone continued to work under the oil lamp, as they discussed excitedly about the crops to grow, the work to do, and the tasks to be allocated to Zhang Xiaolong, Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua when spring arrives.

No one noticed the solemn expression on Liu Qing's face under the wavering light of the oil lamp.

No one also noticed Zhang Xiaohua's eyes that were full of thoughts.

On the morning of the second day, Liu Qing got out of bed unwillingly. She could not sleep the entire night and only slept a bit after the sky lightened up. She realized that her eyes were red and her pallor was poor; Guo Sufei even asked if she was feeling sick.

After breakfast, everyone continued with their tasks. February had already came, so the weather was warm and gentle. Zhang Cai and the rest were done checking their farming tools for spoilage, the crop seeds still had to be put in the sun, and seeing that the ice on the river has begun to melt, the fields should be ready to be toiled anytime soon.

While Liu Qing was helping Guo Sufei sun the seeds, she heard a voice from behind "Qingqing~"

On hearing the familiar voice, she turned her head and her gaze swept over the

short walls of Zhang household's courtyard. She saw her father, uncle butcher Liu and cousin Liu Yueyue already at the entrance.

She responded joyfully "Father~" Then, she flew over to the door and held her father's hands. It has been almost half a month since she saw her family, naturally she would miss them. Upon seeing them now, her eyes turned red and her nose sniffled.

Liu Yueyue, who stood at the other side, said, "Elder sister, what about me? Didn't you see me?"

Liu Qing took her hands and said, "I saw you, how would I have not? I only have one sister who is as pretty as a fairy, how could I have not seen her?"

Liu Yueyue smiled as she said, "Elder sister, look at you. Your eyes turned red just after a few days of not seeing us. In the future, you are not allowed to call me crybaby anymore. Oh my, why is your skin so pale, did you have a hard time here by yourself? But, that can't be right. Your skin seemed to have turned smoother, and even whiter and plumper. Is your beauty already catching up to mine in just a few days?"

Liu Qing scolded jokingly, "You rascal, stop complimenting me to get on my side."

Liu Yueyue turned anxious, and said, "It is true, elder sister. I am not lying to you. You can look at yourself in the mirror."

A thought struck into Liu Qing's mind, and she did not say anything further.

How would teacher Liu and butcher Liu notice these details? They treated their conversation as children teasing each other.

At this moment, Zhang Cai led his family out to welcome the visitors.

Teacher Liu immediately went up to send his greetings towards Zhang Cai, "Old brother, it has been a while. How is your body?"

Zhang Cai politely replied, "Thanks to old brother, I have fully recovered. As you can see, I am not using the clutches anymore."

Then, Zhang Xiaolong, Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua took their turns and offer their greetings.

Teacher Liu has seen them the last time he came over to visit. However, the two elder brothers were bedridden at that time, and only on this meeting did he notice and exclaim silently in his heart, “These two children, despite their ordinary looks and not being well read, to have such a demeanor shows that they have grown up in a good environment.” He quickly helped the boys to recover, and laughed, “It seems that the injuries on these two have healed, this is a cause of celebration. However, Xiaolong had suffered a fracture before so you will have to watch him more closely, and only allow him to work hundred days later. Do not let him impede his recovery just to finish the work in the fields earlier. Oh, that’s right, why were the clutches removed after just ten days?”

Zhang Xiaolong moved his arm vigorously and replied, “I will take note of uncle’s words. Look, my arm is more or less recovered. Even though I still can’t do heavy farm work now, it may be a different story a few days later.”

Butcher Liu interrupted, “Nephew’s body is not ordinarily sturdy. The Wang Er in our village went up the mountains to chop some firewood, got hurt and was bedridden for half a year. In just a few days, you little rascal have already gotten well. Come let me take a look.”

After finishing his sentence, he grabbed onto Zhang Xiaolong’s arm, while Liu Qing panicked and walked forward to hold on to her uncle’s hand, reprimanding, “Uncle, your arms are used to carrying hundreds of jin of meat, but Xiaolong’s arm has just recovered. If you grab his arm like that, you are going to injure him again.”

Feeling embarrassed, butcher Liu withdrew his arm and smiled, “Then I won’t take a look.”

Liu Yueyue who was at a side seemed to notice something, and she nudged Liu Qing with her elbow while sending her signals with her eyes.

Liu Qing’s flushed again, and her movements turned awkward.

Fortunately at this moment, teacher Liu turned to look at Zhang Xiaohua whom he had taken a liking to and stroked his head, “Xiaohua, we have not met in a few days and you have grown that much. I think that by this year, you will be able to catch up to your elder brothers. Furthermore, your eyes look brighter and wiser.”

These words were not false; when teacher Liu first saw Zhang Xiaohua, the latter was just beaten up the bullies and was still worrying about his father and elder brothers, naturally he would look dejected and listless. However, his family has recovered now, so his mood was naturally not bad. Thus, he would look different.

Zhang Xiaohua was obedient, and he replied humbly, "Uncle, this is due to elder sister Liu. She has not only looked after eldest brother, helped our mother with the housework, she had taught me many things as well. With her guidance, I would naturally grow more sensible."

These words made teacher Liu happy, and he laughed, "Good boy, good boy. Old brother, I am jealous of you for producing these good children."

Zhang Cai replied humbly, "We only tried our best, and they hardly read any books. Old brother must be jesting."

Teacher Liu did not agree and said, "It is true, I mean that. The boys have innately good temperament. Even if you were to find a million families, it will be hard to find children as good as these."

Butcher Liu interrupted, "You two better not start, we are all already closely acquainted. I have walked for the whole afternoon, my throat is so parched that it is about emit smoke, let's hurry into the house to drink some water."

When Zhang Cai and teacher Liu heard him, they broke into peals of laughter and hurriedly led everyone back into the common room.

Since the water was just boiled, Guo Sufei went into the room to make some tea, while Liu Yueyue took advantage of the time to ask Liu Qing, "So elder sister, are you interested in that Zhang Xiaolong?"

Liu Qing reddened and said, "What interest, when did I have that?"

Liu Yueyue continued to tease her, "Look at you getting embarrassed like a young lady in love, when are you going to admit it?"

Liu Qing replied, "You little rascal, when did you learn to talk so much? Didn't you come here to see Zhang Xiaohu?"

Upon hearing her retort, Liu Yueyue said evenly, "Elder sister, these words are

not right. Have you forgotten what we said before? Although Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu are good men who even saved us, my ideal type is a scholar with a wealth of knowledge and handsome appearance. The two of them are farmers so I would have to stay at home and do housekeeping chores if I marry them. I was indeed feeling grateful and had some good feelings towards him at that time, but after I went back home to think through carefully, I have decided not to jump into this stove. Elder sister, you have to understand that this is a decision that will affect our future happiness. If we make a mistake, we will have to live with regrets for rest of our lives.”

Liu Qing turned solemn and said, “You are right, Yueyue, I had thought of this too which is why I hesitated for so long. Even though I wished my future husband to be a scholar, but among all these scholars I have met, none had the courage or disposition of Zhang Xiaolong. Despite knowing for only a month, my feelings are deeper than people whom I know for many years. I can’t really explain this feeling, and I believe that both our choices are not wrong, because we all have the freedom to make our own decisions.”

Liu Yueyue said bitterly, “Elder sister, even if you have not made the wrong choice, in the future...”

Liu Qing interrupted, “It is too early to talk about these matters, I have not made my final decision yet.”

Liu Yueyue did not pursue the matter any further, and the two continued to walk quietly.

Not long after, Guo Sufei brought the tea leaves and boiled water out, while Liu Qing prepared the tea and the three of them returned to the common room.

Within the common room, the people inside were having a happy and engaging conversation.

Liu Qing distributed the tea and then sat down quietly, thinking of the matters in her heart.

The people in Zhang household had already gotten used to the tea, and did not pay much attention to it. Butcher Liu was like a buffalo, gulping it down without tasting it. Liu Yueyue was also preoccupied with her thoughts and only had a few sips, and she did not even see Zhang Xiaohu’s gaze towards her.

Only teacher Liu, after having several sips, was surprised and stopped talking.

After seeing teacher Liu's reaction, Zhang Cai asked urgently, "Old brother, is there a problem with the tea? Isn't it good?"

Teacher Liu replied, "No, there is no problem. In fact, it is too good, what kind of tea is this?"

Zhang Cai said embarrassingly, "Honestly, I do not know. We only started drinking this recently, this is the tea the Liu Qing brought from your house."

Teacher Liu turned around and asked Liu Qing, "Qingqing, is this tea made from the tea leaves at home?"

Liu Qing was distracted by her thoughts, and upon hearing her father's question, she blurted, "Sorry father, what did you ask?"

Chapter 34: Fate

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Fate

Teacher Liu asked tenderly, “Qingqing, are you feeling uncomfortable anywhere?”

Liu Qing smiled as she answered, “It is nothing father, I was only a little distracted. What did you ask me?”

Teacher Liu asked, “Is this the tea you brought from home?”

Liu Qing understood her father’s meaning and said, “Yes, father. This is the tea you would drink often. Before I came, I took some of the tea leaves with me. Don’t you feel that this tea is especially delicious?”

Teacher Liu took another sip and replied, “Yes, it doesn’t taste anything like the one at home. This tea’ fragrance is truly mesmerizing.”

This teacher Liu does not have any hobby, but he has a particular liking for quality tea and thus has drunk many types of tea. As their house has a large collection of tea leaves, it was no wonder that Liu Qing had also inherited his taste for good tea. However, the tea he tried today was vastly superior to the ones he drank at home, and since the tea leaves are the same, he guessed that it must be the difference in the water used. Teacher Liu was curious, even though Bali Gou was quite far from Guo village, it was at most half a day worth of travelling, so how could the difference in water quality be so large?

Teacher Liu asked, “Qingqing, why is the water in Guo village so much better than the one in Bali Gou?”

Liu Qing winked at her father and replied, “Yes father, the water here is delightful.”

Liu Qing knew that the uncle of hers has a habit of shooting his mouth, and as soon as he learnt something, it would not be long until the rest of the people in Bali Gou village learnt about it too. Thus, this news of this water has to be kept under wraps from him.

Teacher Liu caught Liu Qing's wink, and did not pursue any further.

However, butcher Liu heard Liu Qing's response and interrupted, "Isn't this easy, just get Zhang Xiaolong to bring a bucket over to you every day."

Teacher Liu pretended to be angry, and said, "Second brother, even if the journey is not half a day's worth of travel, the water may not be as good as this."

Seeing that butcher Liu did not understand, he continued, "The water to make tea tastes best when it is fresh collected from the river. After letting it stay still for a while, the flavor of the tea it makes will be less fresh."

Butcher Liu was unsatisfied, and said, "Only learned people like you are so fastidious to care. How come I do not get that feeling at all? Don't you agree, brother Zhang?" After he finished his sentence, he took another gulp of the tea.

Zhang Cai who was at a side responded by laughing, but he did not say anything else.

Liu Qing went up to pour everybody another cup.

When teacher Liu took his cup, he placed it under his nose and smelled it carefully, before taking small sips to enjoy its taste.

Butcher Liu teased, "What is so special about this tasteless water? Let's drink some alcohol and enjoy."

Teacher Liu pursed his lips and said, "What would you know about my likes? Our interests are different, so there is no need to discuss this any further. What a pity, after tasting this tea, how could I enjoy the other tea I have?"

Butcher Liu replied, "Isn't that easy, just move over to Guo village to live. I heard that this village does not have a teacher, they will only be too happy to welcome you here."

Teacher Liu's eyes brightened, and said, "The boorish you can actually think of such a good idea, it is indeed 'eating three hundred lychees daily, and one

becomes a Lingnan person'. It is a rare chance that I am fated to meet such good tea, I would have no regrets becoming a Guo villager for it."

The speaker said it half-heartedly, but the listener gained deep understanding. Teacher Liu's words "rare chance that I am fated to meet" struck a chord in Liu Qing's heart. Indeed, it was a rare opportunity that she got meet Zhang Xiaolong. Now that she thought in retrospect, ever since she met Zhang Xiaolong, and he got hurt to save her, and she offered to take care of his injuries, before finding the precious spring water, and now her father is thinking of moving to Guo village. She was initially reluctant to marry to a faraway household so that she could look after her father, and now that this obstacle is gone, it felt like pieces and pieces of events have been arranged by fate to bring her and Zhang Xiaolong together. Since it was fate, why was she still being so wishy washy?

When one thought is straightened, the other thousand follows. Liu Qing felt as if a large rock has floated away from her heart.

At this moment, she noticed the reactions of the household towards her father's words. Seeing that they did not understand, Liu Qing explained, "This lychee is supposedly a very tasty fruit, except that it only grows in a place called Lingnan. When people tried the fruit, they were so enamored that he said he was willing to move to Langan in order to eat the fruit every day."

Everyone then understood.

Zhang Cai gleefully said, "If teacher Liu wishes to migrate to our tribe, then we will definitely welcome you with open arms. I will inform the Guo village elder to find you a suitable place."

Teacher Liu immediately said, "Old brother, this matter is not urgent; we can talk about it later. Let's leave it to fate, haha."

Then, teacher Liu sipped on his tea again, before stating his real motive for coming, "Old brother, the reason we came was to bring Liu Qing back home for a while. This child has stayed here for quite a period, and would definitely have missed me, and our own house would also needs housekeeping. Thus Yueyue should have come earlier, but did not come along with Liu Qing because she was needed at home. This time, we thought of switching the girls, what do you

think?”

Zhang Cai did not dare to reply, and turned to look at Guo Sufei.

Guo Sufei saw the sincere expressions on teacher Liu and butcher Liu, as well as the unreadable expression on Liu Yueyue’s face, and knew her answer. She smiled towards teacher Liu and butcher Liu and said, “We can sympathize with our two brother’s situation. Qingqing has been here a period of time when we most needed help, and we are very grateful for that. By now, Xiaolong, Xiaohu, and our head of the household’s injuries have more or less healed, there is no need for Qingqing to stay anymore. If teacher Liu wishes to take Qingqing back, then I will help her pack her belongings now, and follow the two of you back in the afternoon. Yueyue will not need to stay as well.”

Hearing Guo Sufei’s words, a joyful expression appeared on Liu Yueyue’s face, while Liu Qing raised her head and look towards Zhang Xiaohu’s disappointment, and thought, “This Zhang Xiaohu did not speak out or ask about Yueyue, so I did not expect this expression from him. It seems like there may be some trouble, I will have to find some time to remind him that my little sister’s heart is not in him.”

Butcher Liu could also not contain his joy, and said, “Sister-in-law, didn’t we agree upon it previously? Yueyue should also contribute her bit, if not, aren’t we letting her off too easily?”

Guo Sufei smiled in reply, “I have always known that you are a straightforward person, why would we hide our difficulties from you? Look at my two children and old brother Zhang, they are both in the pink of health with no difficulties in moving around by themselves. Thus, there is really no need for her to stay.”

Teacher Liu also smiled, and held butcher Liu back from persisting, saying, “Since sister-in-law has said so, then I believe there is really no need for the children to stay behind. Second brother does not need to insist any further. As for the matter of Qingqing following us back, I think it is better to ask for her opinion first.”

Liu Qing pondered before saying, “How about this, father. I will not follow you back for the time being. Since there is still Yueyue to do the housekeeping, there should be no large problems at home. I have not even been here for a month,

even though I do miss home, there is no urgent need for me to go home. Furthermore, Xiaolong's injuries have healed up to its last stage of recovery, I should tidy up the ends of the things I picked up and wait for him to be completely recovered before going back home."

When she finished her sentence, butcher Liu could not control his surprise and stood up, saying, "Did you discuss this with your father beforehand? How come the both of your words are the same?"

Liu Qing asked in surprise, "Second uncle, what do you mean?"

Before butcher Liu could open his mouth, Liu Yueyue spoke up, "Elder sister, earlier when we were on the way here, the two men made a bet. Your father said that you would not be willing to come back, and my father said that you would. When my father asked why, your father said that Qingqing does not like letting other people pick up the ends for her, and since she has not stayed for a full month yet and that Zhang Xiaolong's injuries must not be healed, she would not return home under these circumstances. My father is naturally angry, as he thought the both of you have collaborated behind his back."

This Liu Yueyue had a glib tongue, saying your father in one sentence, and my father in another, making everyone laugh.

Liu Qing said to butcher Liu, "Second uncle has watched me grow up, why don't you know about my temper?"

Butcher Liu helpless replied, "I only remember you when you when you still wiping your snot, you little rascal. Who would know that you and Yueyue would have grown and become ladies in a few years? How would I know about your temper, I just assumed that you would miss home."

As they talked, Guo Sufei noticed that the time was getting late, and she went out to prepare lunch, while Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue went out to help here, leaving the boys in the room to talk.

Lunch in Zhang household was simple as usual, and would be ready not long later. Zhang Xiaohua has also returned from outside the village with the wine, and butcher Liu was naturally the happiest about the boy's return.

After they had their lunch, the sun had just began to descend. Teacher Liu and

the other two bade their farewell, and teacher Liu invited Zhang Cai over to his village, “Old brother, tomorrow is the second of February when the dragon will raise its head. There will be a gathering in Bali Gou, why don’t you come over tomorrow to my place?”

Zhang Cai pondered a while and rejected, “Even though most of our injuries are healed, there are still areas that have yet to recover, so there may be some small problems when travelling long distances. Furthermore, we have a sick elderly in our household, so it is best not to leave too far. When we have the time in the future, we will definitely come over to visit.”

Teacher Liu knew that his reasons were not excuses, so he did not insist, and they bade farewell at the village entrance, while Liu Qing and Zhang Xiaohua sent them off slightly later.

Then, Liu Qing reluctantly watched her family leave.

Chapter 35: Expansion

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Expansion

Within Piaomiao sect's discussion hall, the Piaomiao six tigers and Zhang Chengyue were discussing about how to expand and run the next meeting among the four faction leaders.

Ou Peng was sitting in his usual seat as he looked towards the brothers whom he grown up together had returned after ten days of rest. All of them seemed to have consolidated the recent growth in their prowess, the explosive power that they were emitting ten days ago has all been restrained. From their current appearance, they no longer looked like top martial exponents, instead, they have returned to the simplicity of nature.

Ou Peng felt pleased, and he was not the only one feeling so. Apart from Zhang Chengyue who did not take the pill, everyone's mood was in high spirits. Of course, after ten days of cultivation, their initially excited hearts have calmed down, and what they have to do now is plan the expansion on their sect in hopes that they will reach the peak and join the ranks of Dalin temple, ChuanXiang sect and Heavenly alliance one day.

Ou Peng coughed, cleared his throat, and said, "Fellow brothers, I congratulate all of you again on your improvement in martial arts."

The rest courteously replied, "Same to you. We thank the sect master for making this happen."

Ou Peng continued, "Now that the power of our Piaomiao sect has grown, I wonder if there is any news on other three factions. Chengyue, do you have any report?"

Zhang Chengyue immediately replied, "Sect master Ou, there was news from

thousand swords peak that the sect master Wan Chengjiu and several of the elders entered closed door cultivation. Like sect master and senior uncles, they have chosen not to meet with other people after they came out, and are likely to have experienced vast improvements in their martial arts as well. The spies we sent to Tan family could not reach the upper ranks, so the situation there is uncertain. As for Yanming sect, the information we have is even scarcer because we could not infiltrate into their sect, and there are no news circulating outside.”

Ou Peng was not too happy as he said, “Chengyue, although you have put in much effort in this area, they are still not up to standard. If our Piaomiao sect is to grow in the future, then there has to be a steady inflow of news. You have to buckle up, and use all sorts of methods to plant our spies in the different sects. If not, we will be blind to the currents around us.”

Zhang Cheng Yue’s face was full of shame as he replied, “Yes, master. I will take note of this.”

Ou Peng then continued, “This is because master has not instructed you well. In the past, I had only taught you how to train, which is why I am now trying to impart to you the responsibilities of a sect leader. You can look to your fourth senior uncle on how to do so in the future.”

Zhang Chengyue nodded in understanding.

Then, Ou Peng carried on, “The herbs in the secret are has been refined by the pharmacy hall to produce yet another batch of pills. There are now fifty plus such pills. Fellow brothers, inform your personal disciples when you return to gather at the martial display hall tomorrow afternoon, and to prepare for closed door cultivation. This has to remain a secret. Also, Chengyue, go inform your fellow junior disciples.”

Everyone gave a sign to show that they understood.

Ou Peng pondered and said, “Chengyue, pick a few second or third generation talents and bring them to the discussion hall tomorrow. We need to expand the number of core disciples in our sect.”

At this moment, fourth elder Shangguan interrupted, “Sect master brother, our Piaomiao sect’s power has experienced a large rise, so it is time we consider expanding our boundaries.”

Ou Peng nodded, and replied, “Yes, this is one of the reasons why us brothers have gathered.”

First elder Hu raised his question, “Old fourth, the matter of expansion cannot be done simply through words. What idea do you have?”

Fourth elder Shangguan replied, “I have considered this problem during these few days, and currently have an idea of the road we should take.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “Then you should hurry and say it out. Who doesn’t know that you are our Piaomiao sect’s chief strategist?”

Fourth elder Shangguan continued, “Actually, my idea is very simple. I feel that the first step should be to follow senior’s idea and raise the capabilities of our core disciples, then use these core disciples to form a crack team. Then, we will assign them to the hall of external affairs where they will be dispatched for missions. The thousand swords peak in the south has also experienced a surge of power due to the same incident, so that option is struck out. As for the Golden crow sect in the east and Luoshui sect in the west, their powers were slightly inferior to us in the past and thus good targets. However, if we were to make our moves on both sides at once, it will disperse our power. This matter will require senior sect master to decide.”

Ou Peng pondered for a moment, and said, “Then we shall temporarily set Luoshui sect as our target. Golden crow sect is in the west, and its area of influence slightly overlaps with thousand swords peak. Hence, they may already have some relationships with the latter, or perhaps the thousand swords peak have set their sights on them. Wait till Yucheng and Wan Jiucheng form an alliance before investigating them. Luoshui sect has already set their roots in Luoshui, this is something we cannot compete against. Thus, we have to take advantage of the fact that they are still green and take over them. It will surely bring our Piaomiao sect benefits in the future if we take over both land and water.”

First elder Hu quipped in and said, “Third junior brother, water warfare is a weakness of ours. Why don’t we look for Xinrong sect in the east? After all, their roots are still not deep, and we have confidence fighting on land.”

Ou Peng smiled towards first elder Hu and said, “Eldest senior brother, we

have both been fooled by Xinrong's low profile. I have recently received the news that Xinrong is a chess piece placed by Dalin temple in Yu city and our Pingyang city, and we cannot move rashly against them. Even though this Luoshui sect fights in the water, we will attack first and if our plans are good, there is still a high chance of success."

Ou Peng drank another mouth of tea, and continued, "Even though our Piaomiao sect has always concentrated on the land, but with Pingyang city surrounded by Luoshui sect, Golden crow sect and Xinrong sect, there is little room for expansion left on land. If we gain the advantage that Luoshui sect has on water, it will be more beneficial to our sect in the future."

The other people were also thinking silently.

After half the time to boil tea, fourth elder Shangguan said, "If we follow this plan of action, I am afraid that our sect will not have enough manpower."

Ou Peng replied, "I already have a solution for this. We will definitely need manpower for Piaomiao sect to expand. In the past, our Piaomiao sect would concentrate our resources on the few talented disciples. However, now that we have promoted more disciples into the core disciples, we face a shortage of outer disciples. Let's do it this way, Chengyue, think of an idea to recruit a new batch of disciples as soon as possible to bolster our sect's strength. I shall leave everything about this matter to you to decide."

Zhang Chengyue nodded his head.

Then, Ou Peng said towards Zhang Chengyue, "Chengyue, you may take your leave first. Inform you fellow junior disciples, take a good rest yourself, and prepare to improve your martial skill tomorrow."

Zhang Chengyue's face turned red in excitement and excused himself.

Fifth elder Liu who had been sitting at a side then spoke at this moment, "Isn't it just to improve your martial skill. Look at yourself being so anxious about it."

Zhang Chengyue though in his heart, "Elder-ah, this is about improving ones martial skill, how can I not be excited? I heard that you gained twenty years' worth of training at one go, weren't you excited then too?"

Of course, he did not say what was in his heart and instead replied, "Yes, fifth

senior uncle. I should have controlled my emotions better.”

Ou Peng said, “Do not listen to you fifth senior uncle’s trash talk. However, you are indeed too excited. Your nerves have to be calm when you take the pill in order for you to cultivate properly, or you will waste this precious treasure.”

Zhang Chengyue walked out quickly, trying only to get out of his fifth senior uncle’s sight.

After Zhang Chengyue left the hall, Ou Peng retuned his gaze towards fifth elder Liu and said, “Fifth junior brother, this Chengyue has a steady personality, so don’t keep making fun of him.”

Sixth elder Xu added, “Hehe, still talking about someone else. On that day, wasn’t old fifth just as excited, leaving with Shi Niu for a drink immediately after this power up? If that is not excited, then how did you get so drunk that day?”

Fifth elder Liu turned red and argued, “I was tired after absorbing the pill, or else why would I get drunk before Shi Niu?”

Everyone laughed in response.

The, Ou Peng switched to a serious tone as he addressed everyone, “Fellow brothers, we have finished refining the herbs that we picked the previous time. The second of February is coming in a few days, and the four factions have agreed to meet in Wutong mountain to discuss the matter of the remaining herbs. This is also a good opportunity to form an alliance, what do you all think?”

Fourth elder Shagguan replied, “Senior brother, I do not think the possibility of forming an alliance is high.”

Ou Peng asked, “Why so?”

Fourth elder Shangguan explained, “Thousand swords peak and our Piaomiao sect may form an alliance as we are all sects in Jianghu, and can share weal and woe. However, Yanming sect and Tan family, despite being part of Jianghu, do not participate in any of the affairs in Jianghu, so they have neither the reasons nor the ability to form an alliance with us.”

Ou Peng rubbed his chin as though he was thinking, and said, “An alliance on the surface is impossible. Be it the direction of our growth, the compatibility of

our strengths, or the hierarchy structure of the alliance, the four of us will not be able to provide a reasonable explanation for our cooperation. If we do form an alliance, it will draw the attention of the other sects, bringing more harm than benefits. I propose for a looser form of collusion, meaning an alliance among the four faction heads rather than the four factions themselves. In this way, we can enjoy the benefits of the secret area while maintaining its secrecy.”

First elder Hu nodded and said, “This is a good idea. The purpose of this alliance is for the sake of the secret area only; we should separate it from the affairs of the entire sect. If one of the four factions reveals the secret, the other three can punish the troublemaker.”

Ou Peng smiled bitterly, “If the secret is revealed, there will be no need for punishment. There will soon be a rain of blood in Jianghu, so we have to consolidate our power before then.”

Then, Ou Peng turned towards second elder Li who was frowning silently all this while, and asked, “Second brother, have you seen the sword manual?”

Second elder Li nodded in a dejected manner and did not say anything.

Ou Peng did not mind him, and continued, “How many disciples who train in swords in our sect do you think we can train to learn this sword manual?”

Second elder Li shook his head.

Ou Peng turned slightly dispirited and said, “Sigh, indeed we cannot ask them to switch their way of training midway. Fourth brother, when Chengyue recruits the new disciples, you can pick a few from them to let them learn from the sword manual. They can also be given pointers on the side by second brother, although the best case scenario is if second brother accepts a few as his personal disciples.”

Second elder Li nodded in approval. It seems that after the improvement in power, he has focused even more on training in the way of the sword, and would not talk much anymore.

Chapter 36: Gather again

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Gather again

The responsibility of nurturing Piaomiao's disciples was already the responsibility of fourth elder Shangguan so he naturally accepted the former's instructions.

Ou Peng continued, "Although there are many herbs in the secret area, the quantity is still limited. I have allowed Yan'er take one herb of each type from the previous batch, and she is currently trying to cultivate them in mountain villa, although we are still uncertain about the likelihood of success. Sixth brother, you will have to take note of this area, and try to satisfy Yan'er's request if she has any."

Sixth elder Xu smiled and said, "No problem, third brother. This Yan'er loves all sorts of weird things, perhaps she can actually succeed in cultivating some good herbs."

On mention of Ou Peng's little sister, everyone would be full of smiles. First elder Hu even said, "Time sure flies. In a blink of an eye, this little Yan'er has grown into a woman. Sigh, can we choose not to grow older?"

The fifth elder who was indulging in his wine and not participating in the conversation also added, "Yea, I still remembered when she peed on my head. And now, she has already turned into a heroine."

Ou Peng rolled his eyes and said, "This incident can only be mentioned among us. Do not talk about it if there is an outsider, or if Yan'er is around."

"Unless you do not want to see your axe anymore."

Fifth elder Liu scratched his head and replied, "I know, I would not want that

woman to throw my axe and let it sink into the water.”

Everyone laughed, and the tension in the atmosphere from earlier was dissipated.

Everyone took a sip of their tea. The first elder Hu said, “Old third, there is not much time till second of February, you will need to begin your preparations. Let old second and old fifth follow, and pick a good crop from the second generation disciples to leave a good impression.”

Ou Peng shook his head and replied, “I plan to follow the same as last year. I will only bring my wife and a few attendants, as if we are going to pray in the dragon god shrine, to not rouse any suspicion.”

Fourth elder Shangguan shook his head and said, “Third brother, if our sect makes such a big move, the people who are observing us will definitely notice our action even if they may not know our plans. Nevertheless, we should not be careless and it will be safer to bring more people along.”

Ou Peng pondered for a while and said, “Fourth junior brother is still using the lenses of the past to look at the current situation. The martial skill levels of us brothers are now close to the top of Jianghu. If I choose to escape, I believe that the number of people who can obstruct me from doing so will be very few, and among those people, who would lower themselves to sneak an attack on me?”

Fourth elder Shangguan threw a gaze towards first elder Hu, and first elder Hu pondered a while before he said, “Old third-ah, old fourth does have some reason. There is no harm in additional preparation, but insufficient preparation would lead to disaster. There is no shortage of traps and hidden danger in Jianghu, so one’s safety should be placed as the highest priority. Let’s do it this way, since you are unwilling to attract any attention, do not bring many people along. Just bring Shi Niu as your driver, so that he can protect sister-in-law and the attendants.”

Before Ou Peng could respond, fifth elder Liu clapped his hands loudly and praised, “Good idea, eldest brother. That Shi Niu was brought up by a carriage driver, and his hands have gone itchy from not pulling the reins for a long time. Furthermore, his body is as sturdy as a plate of metal, which serves as a good shield for sister-in-law.”

Ou Peng had no choice but to agree, “Alright, then we should follow this plan. We shall not bring any second generation disciples, because they are still raising their martial skill level. There is no need to impede their progress, and those who are not chosen to raise their martial skill this time round will be useless to me anyway.”

Everyone recognized that Ou Peng has taken a step back so they did not insist any further. After settling a few more sect matters, everyone dispersed from the meeting.

The oil lamp in the meeting hall was extinguished, and the dark discussion hall was like a old man who has closed his eyes to sleep.

Yu city was the capital of state Yu, and was a few days journey from Pingyang city.

Ou Peng left early in the morning of the second day. Since he was going to pray in the dragon go shrine, he would have to travel with a sincere mindset and not use his qinggong. Just as fifth elder had said, Shi Niu was indeed an old hand in steering the carriage, and when he heard that the sect master was going to require his expertise, he woke up early to inspect the horses and carriages. At this moment, he was leisurely steering the carriage, with looks of joy in his expression.

Ou Peng and his wife were sitting in the carriage. Even though this carriage was made specially using top quality material, and its workmanship was first-rate, the carriage ride was exceptionally smooth. Ou Peng looked at the cups that were filled with wine on the table, and he smiled to his wife, “This Shi Niu’s skills in steering the carriage is a cut above the rest, it seems that we cannot do without him in the future.”

Ou Peng’s wife returned the smile and said, “That would be wasting his potential.”

Ou Peng replied, “What does the current Jianghu lack in? Human talent. This is a good example of human talent, his martial power is able to stand against a thousand people and his carriage steering skills are top-rate. Our Piaomiao sect is like a crouching tiger and hidden dragon.”

Ou Peng’s wife bantered, “This sect master is always so serious when I see him

in the sect, why is he full of mischief right now? If we are talking about human talent, you would be the number one example in the sect. Not only is your mastery of Piaomiao steps the highest, your ability to make his wife the happiest is also at its peak.”

Ou Peng laughed aloud, and said towards the outside of the carriage, “Shi Niu, good job. The top talent in steering the carriage in our sect is you, but the top talent in making his wife happy is still me.”

Upon hearing his words, Shi Niu broke into peals of laughter and put more effort into steering the carriage.

The mistress in the carriage turned red as she nudged Ou Peng, causing the attendants in the carriage to laugh quietly as well.

As this moment, the sound of Shi Niu singing came from outside the carriage, probably because they have reached a deserted road and Shi Niu’s spirits was soaring higher.

Shi Niu sang aloud, “Little sister sits on the boat, while elder brother I walk onshore. The loving rope pulls...” Shi Niu had apparently heard this love song from elsewhere.

Everyone in the carriage burst in laughter.

The journey took several days, and soon after, Yu city appeared in front of their sights. The trip was smooth as they did not meet any obstacles along the way.

Yu city’s main road was very spacious, and there were several trees planted along its sides. As the weather had already turned warm, green budding leaves were appearing in these trees.

There were many people on the road, and the horse carriage could not travel as freely as before. However, under Shi Niu’s expert hands, the carriage did not slow down when compared to before.

Lady Ou looked at the scenery outside the carriage and exclaimed, “This city is indeed deserving of its title as the capital, its splendor is not just slightly above Pingyang city, even the number of people is higher. I wonder if the dragon god shrine is full today.”

When the horse carriage reached dragon god shrine, they realized that people were constantly flowing in and out of the shrine, and even the horse carriage did not have space to park and wait.

Shi Niu stood on his seat while he looked around, and upon seeing Ou Peng and the rest came back, he jumped off his seat and asked, "Sect master, why did you come out so soon?"

Ou Peng replied, "The number of people coming here each year is so large that the monks have their hands full, and we could not find a time to speak to their abbot. Hence, we will return again when they are less busy."

Shi Niu escorted the party up into the carriage, then asked Ou Peng, "Sect master, shall we go to the sect branch in Yu city?"

Ou Peng waved his hands and said, "There is no need to rush over yet. Go to the restaurant over there to purchase some wine and food, and we will head to Yutong mountain next."

Shi Niu accepted his instructions and went to buy some wine and food.

Lady Ou asked curiously, "Why go up Yutong mountain? The previous time, you went along with Sir Yanming, Wan Chengjiu and Tan Yefeng for a casual gathering, could it be that you are meeting them there again?"

Ou Peng smiled, "That is right. We did not have our fill of fun last year, so we have to continue once more this year."

Soon after, Shi Niu returned with the wine and food, and then, he rode the carriage up Yutong mountain.

Dragon god shrine is at the foot of Yutong mountain. Not long after, the carriage reached a rest-stop in the mountain, where wine and accommodation was offered. Ou Peng and the rest of his party checked into some of the rooms, where lady Ou and the attendants rested. Then, Ou Peng brought Shi Niu and they walked up the path which lead to the peak.

Yutong mountain was not very high, and it was not a suitable season for mountain trekking, so there were not many people. Ou Peng took light steps as he led from the front, and even though Shi Niu was an external martial arts practitioner, and he was carrying the wine and food, he was not least bit tired

upon reaching the peak.

They reached the peak soon after. Seeing Shi Niu's even breathing and unchanged expression, Ou Peng could not help but feel admiration in his heart. Even though he had only demonstrated three tenths of his qinggong, this three tenths was already a considerably high level in Jianghu. The fact that Shi Niu was able to catch up to him without difficulties proved the effectiveness of the bone refining pill.

The time was close to midday, and sunlight shone on the peak of Yutong mountain. Ou Peng looked under the tree at the peak of the mountain, and there was still no one who has arrived yet. Ou Peng signaled to Shi Niu to walk towards the shade. Then, he sat on the stone while he instructed Shi Niu to spread the food and wine out at the space in front of him.

Before Shi Niu was done with his task, Ou Peng heard footsteps coming from the path that led to the mountain peak. He stood up and saw a short and muscular figure heading up the path, it was indeed thousand swords peak's Wan Chengjiu who has arrived.

Ou Peng went forward to greet the newcomer, "Brother Wan, nice to meet you."

As Wan Chengjiu took the last step up, he replied, "Sect master Ou has come very early. The appointed time was at noon, and I thought that I would be the earliest. I had not expected to see anyone else."

Ou Peng said, "I came early in order to prepare the wine and dishes, as well as for my own leisure."

Wan Chengjiu replied, "Sect master Ou is indeed meticulous, you have my admiration."

Then, the two men walked towards the shade and started to chat idly.

After another half bell of time, just as the sun was about to reach its peak, the other two people had not arrived and the two men present wondered in their hearts, "Has something happened to them?"

Just as they began to worry, a laughter sounded from below, "Brother Tan is slower than me by a step, so this match is considered to be my victory."

It was the sound of Sir Yanming's laughter.

Ou Peng and Wan Chengjiu exchanged smiles, and they turned their heads towards the mouth of the road.

Then, they saw Sir Yanming's lean figure appear, followed by an average size figure middle-aged man wearing the clothes of a wealthy person, who was naturally Tan Yefeng.

Chapter 37: Alliance

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Alliance

The four men exchanged greetings as soon as they met.

Wan Chengjiu asked, "What was the meaning of brother Tanming's words from earlier?"

Sir Yanming laughed as he said "I met brother Tan at the foot of the mountain, and because it was almost the time of our appointment, we had a friendly race. It seems that I have won the race."

Ou Peng smiled, "Brother Tan's qingggong has never been his strength, you can try to win him over a game of chess later."

Sir Yanming said, "I know that I can't beat him in chess, but we are only going to drink, not fight today. I am afraid that sect master Ou is going to be disappointed this time."

Tan Yefeng added, "Brother Yanming has won this round, so I will drink three bowls of wine as punishment later."

Ou Peng and Wan Chengjiu laughed and said, "Brother Tan is so straightforward. This way please, Brother Yanming, brother Tan."

Everyone sat under the tree, and seeing Shi Niu standing there motionlessly, they asked, "Who is this little brother?"

Ou Peng introduced, "This is my Piaomiao sect's disciple Shi Niu. Shi Niu, come over to greet Sir Yanming and Tan family master."

Shi Niu went over and greeted the elders.

Ou Peng then instructed him to stand guard at the mouth of the road which

led to the mountain peak to deter any uninvited guests.

Everyone sat down, and Tan Yefeng took a vat of wine from the ground and poured it into a bowl. Then, he said to Sir Yanming, “Look careful, I am drinking first.”

He raised the bowl to his mouth, and gulped it down in one breath. He then continued to drink a second and third bowl. On his third bowl, Ou Peng said, “Brother Tan, we shall accompany you as well.” After finishing his sentence, he poured a bowl for himself. Sir Yanming and Wan Chengjiu agreed in unison and they both proceeded to pour themselves a bowl of wine. Everyone raised and knocked their bowls, and finished their wine in one breath. Then, they set their bowls on the ground.

Tan Yefeng began to speak first, “Only brother Ou Peng was meticulous. I came in a hurry, and seeing that I was about to be late, I left the matter of food and wine at the back of my head. I believe brother Yanming is the same as well?”

Sir Yanming said in an embarrassed tone, “Yes, I did not expect there to be so many people at dragon god shrine. I had to spend a significant amount of time to make preparations for my family, and ended up with less time for myself.”

Wan Chengjiu laughed aloud and said, “I was not delayed anywhere during my trip, but the thought of getting wine and food had never occurred to me before. Fortunately there is still sect master Ou who is meticulous and well prepared. Anyway, there is wine and food here so why do we bother talking about these things?”

Ou Peng agreed and said, “Brother Wan is correct, as long as someone had prepared the refreshments, does it matter who did so? Come, let’s have another round.”

Everyone laughed, and they drank another round of wine.

Tan Yefeng was the first to speak, “Everybody, even though the number of visitors to Yutong mountain is few, there are still some people. Letting Shi Niu guard the mouth of the road is only a temporary solution. I think we should get down to business now, the earlier we discuss these matters, the sooner we can have another round of drink and fun. What do you all say?”

Sir Yanming replied, "I do have this intention."

Ou Peng asked, "Then shall we determine the time for the next expedition to the secret area?"

Wan Chengjiu nodded in agreement.

Tan Yefeng said, "However, the booklet says that the secret area is only accessible on the fifteen of every year."

Sir Yanming said, "Brother Tan, please be at ease. According to my deduction, the reason why the booklet states only one day each year can be due to two possibilities: Firstly, the secret area is protected by a formation concealed in the jujube forest, and the entrance can only be opened on the fifteenth day of each year. Secondly, the entrance is shown only on the fifteenth day of each year. I have already made a marking at the entrance, and it should not be too difficult to be found. And so far, I have not heard of any formation in Jianghu that is restricted by time. Furthermore, don't you think that it is ridiculous that this formation will only allow visitors on a single day each year? Brother Wan, brother Ou, your sects have been established for quite some time now, have you heard of any related incidents?"

Wan Chengjiu and Ou Peng exchanged glances, and shook their heads. However, Ou Peng added, "Even if we have not encountered such an incident, and there are no records of it in our sects, but it does not certify that your conjecture is true. We cannot conclude that this formation has no time restriction built in place."

The four men remained silent. After all, none of the men had any in-depth knowledge on formations, and their sects did not possess such talents; perhaps even the whole of Jianghu no longer contained such people, so how could they form an educated judgement?

Tan Yefeng said, "Then there are only two routes to choose from. Firstly, we can wait patiently for another year before forming a team, and secondly, we can pick a time and send some people to scout if the secret area is still accessible. What do you all think of this?"

Wan Chengjiu replied, "The matter of retrieving the treasures from the secret area is consequential on our sects, and there should be no area for mistakes. Even

though we have not attracted any attention by sending our second generation disciples the first time round, I suggest that we do not attempt again as long as there is a small chance of failure in order to keep this secret well hidden. If not, the secret area will no longer be monopolized by our sect.”

Ou Peng agreed and said, “There are no secrets in Jianghu. For all we know, we have already caught someone’s eye by gathering here in Yutong mountain, and they are currently spying on us this very second.”

Sir Yanming said, “Then are we supposed to waste a year’s worth of time just like that?”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “Brother Yanming, you do not understand because you are an outsider, but when our sects act in Jianghu, it will be unavoidable for mess-ups to occur, and for the fish to swim along with the dragons. Hence, it is very difficult to maintain a secret, which is why we opt to be so cautious.”

Wan Chengjiu nodded in agreement.

Sir Yanming was still not willing to back down and he said, “Since you all feel that way, why don’t I find a time and enter the secret area on my own?”

Wan Chengjiu and Ou Peng scrunched their brows at the same time. Only Tan Yefeng remained unmoved, as though he already expected such a reaction from sir Yanming.

Ou Peng noticed Tan Yefeng’s expression and asked the latter, “What is your opinion?”

Tan Yefeng let out a cough before replying, “Actually, I already had such an intention. If brother Yanming had not mentioned it, I would have raised the idea myself.”

Wan chengjiu lowered his head and remained silent, as though he was thinking through again.

Ou Peng said, “Before we decide if we should go to the secret area, I have a suggestion that is up for discussion.”

Everyone looked curiously at Ou Peng as they waited for him to speak.

Ou Peng continued, “I propose that we form an alliance, to share the benefits

of the secret place equally.”

Sir Yanming shook his head and said, “Our mountain sect cannot form an alliance with your Piaomiao sect and thousand swords peak. Both of your sects are too entrenched in the affairs of Jianghu, and would often face threats to your survival. An alliance will not be beneficial to the advancement of our mountain sect.”

Tan Yefeng also agreed fully.

Ou Peng then said, “The two of you have misunderstood. The alliance I am proposing differs from the alliance that you normally hear about. We do not have to involve ourselves in each other’s enemies in Jianghu; this is merely an alliance of the four of us personally. Even though we cannot become brothers who share weal and woe, we can form a common interest party in the matter of the secret area. Finally, this alliance will only be limited to the secret area, and will not have any spillover. What do guys you think?”

Wan Chengjiu’s expression turned to joy as he said, “Sect master Ou is truly prepared for all matters. This is a good idea, I approve of it.”

Sir Yanming and Tan Yefeng both smiled and praised the idea.

Thus, Ou Peng took out a vat of wine, and dripped a bit of blood into the wine, while the other three followed suit. Then, Ou Peng shook the wine before taking a swig, then passing it to Wan Chengjiu. Wan Chengjiu also drank some, followed by Tan Yefeng and Sir Yanming.

Finally, Sir Yanming smashed the empty vat onto the floor, and everyone laughed, “Alliance formed!”

Everyone shared another vat of wine, and Ou Peng then said “Since brother Yanming and brother Tan have expressed their intention to go ahead with another expedition, then brother Wan and I will step back and follow your wishes. How about this, we will send our disciples to meet again at the previous meetup point at the end of the month, and brother Yanming will be in charge of leading the expedition again, okay?”

Sir Yanming replied, “No problem, this is naturally my responsibility. However, do we still need to send our relatives to each other’s sides again?”

Ou Peng, Wan Chengjiu and Tan Yefeng exchanged glances, and Ou Peng said, "The previous time was our first collaboration, and we did not trust each other then. Now that we have formed an alliance, I do not see the need to anymore."

Wan Chengjiu and Tan Yefeng both agreed.

At this moment, Shi Niu walked over and said, "Sect master, there are some tourists coming up the mountain path, should I stop them?"

Ou Peng raised his hand and said, "This Yutong mountain is not our own house. Naturally, we should not obstruct any tourist from coming through, you do not have to go back to stand guard, just come over and wait here with us."

After finishing his sentence, the four men poured more wine and enjoyed the food, while talking about interesting events that had occurred in Jianghu.

Not long after, there were indeed some people who came to the mountain peak. They had the appearances of tourists, and seeing that there were already people drinking in the otherwise picturesque scenery, they did not loiter for long and left soon after.

Wan Chengjiu asked Ou Peng, "Could we be getting paranoid?"

Ou Peng smiled as he replied, "These people may not be, but there are still more people below. These people know that we belong in Jianghu, so why they come up so casually?"

Ou Peng appeared to have remembered something and asked Wan Chengjiu, "The location of the secret area must be kept a secret. Where is that fierce tiger sect's Shitu Ping now?"

Wan Chengjiu smiled, drank some wine, and said, "Brother Ou, you can be at ease. Even though I am not as meticulous as you, this little matter has not slipped off my mind. Ever since sect master Shitu came to my sect, she has never left. I have already appointed an elder to accept her as his disciple, and sent some capable men to Lu town. This sect master Shitu is no longer any sect master, but is a disciple of our thousand swords peak."

Chapter 38: Visitors

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Visitors

Ou Peng asked, “How did this come to be?”

Wan Chengjiu smiled as he replied, “Shitu Ping wanted to learn the martial arts of our thousand swords peak so she has chosen to stay in our sect for an extended period of time. It is not a short distance between my sect and town Lu, so it is naturally difficult for her to handle her sect affairs. As her senior uncle, I would naturally have to look after her interest, so I sent some capable disciples to take over her fierce tiger sect. If not for her, I would not have bothered about such a small sect.”

Upon hearing his answer, Ou Peng smiled and said, “Brother Wan sure goes an extra mile.”

However, he thought in his heart, “This sly fox, acting all noble despite having taken advantage of someone.”

Wan Chengjiu also said, “All this is for the sake of protecting our secret. Otherwise, would I be willing to do such a despicable thing.”

Everyone said, “It has been hard on brother Wan, here, let’s have another toast.”

Then, the men discontinued the talk about the secret area, and started gossiping on the recent bloodsheds of Jianghu, the seasons, and other irrelevant subjects until they finished all the wine and food. Then, they descended from the mountain and returned to their respective duties. As for the increase in strength that each faction experienced from the treasures in the secret area, no one seemed to mind that they have avoided the topic.

In a secret village somewhere far and between Lu town and Pingyang city, there was a large manor, and in a hall situated at the north of the manor seated two people. One was a slightly skinny youth, the other was a middle-aged man with white streaks in his hair. They were fierce tiger sect's hallmaster Shitu – Shitu Liang, and hallmaster Zhao. The two had worried expressions as they drank their tea; hallmaster Zhao took a sip as though he did not taste the fragrance of his drink, and put the cup heavily onto the table, before asking Shitu Liang, "Hallmaster Shitu, there has been no news of our sect master for almost a month. What should we do in this seen-neither-the-person-nor-his-body situation?"

Shitu Liang reprimanded, "Hallmaster Zhao, what is the meaning of this? How could you say such inauspicious words right after the New Year?"

Hallmaster Zhao replied apologetically, "I am just too worried, I'll eat my own word." The, he spat towards the floor to show his mistake.

Shitu Liang said comfortingly, "Even though the sect master is not within the sect, aren't all of us still around? Everything is still running smoothly, and our sect is not decimated right?"

Hallmaster Zhao laughed darkly, "Hallmaster Shitu, you said not to say inauspicious things."

Shitu Liang was stunned for a while, and he spat towards the floor before saying, "Keep, keep, I keep my words back. This is really frustrating, and it is making me loses my senses."

Hallmaster Zhao replied, "Not a big deal, aren't we all just worried about our sect master?"

Shitu Liang said, "Our sect master had ever gone out for an extended period before, but she still returned some news back to the sect, and the most she would take is a few days. However, she has been missing for quite some time now, could it be that she really..." Shitu Liang did not dare to continue his sentence.

Hallmaster Zhao immediately said, "Hallmaster Shitu, during this period when our sect master is not around, our sect members are celebrating the New Year in their homes. Now that the celebrations are ending, and everyone is about to

return, there will be a large dump of sect affairs to handle. If there is still no news of the sect master by then, the situation will probably sour. At least some of our members would be suspicious.”

Shitu Liang nodded and said, “True, let’s think of a plan or there may be waves of trouble coming.”

Just as they were talking, someone came over to report, “Hallmasters, there are seven people on fast horses heading towards our location. They seem to be from the Jianghu.”

Shitu Liang was surprised, and he looked at hallmaster Zhao and said, “Who could it be at the period of time? The sects whom we have good relations with had already visited us, yet how would someone who is unfamiliar with the geography here know our location? Could it be that they are passing by?”

Hallmaster Zhao replied, “Probably. However, will they stir up some trouble with us?”

Shitu Liang shook his head and said, “The number of people is few, how could seven people be a match for our entire sect? Even though most of us aren’t here, there are still at least dozens of people around.”

Hallmaster Zhao was puzzled and he asked, “Then why else would they come?”

Shitu Liang said, “We should observe the situation for now. First see if they are truly here to visit us, but we will still have to make some preparations in case of an attack. Men, inform our fellow sect brothers to prepare for the arrival of some guests. Also, prepare some smoke signals. If need be, call for our brothers who are not in the sect right now to return.”

After half the time to boil a kettle of tea, another person came over with a new report, “Reporting to hallmaster, the seven men are approaching our village soon. There are no other people behind them.”

Shitu Liang got off his feet, and said towards hallmaster Zhao, “Let’s go. The road to our village only leads to here, it seems that they are here to visit our fierce tiger sect.”

Hallmaster Zhao also stood up and replied, “Okay, let’s invite our guests.”

These seven people were travelling very fast. By the time Shitu Liang reached the entrance of the manor, the sounds of their horses could be heard, and seven figures in black could be seen from afar. As they approached, everyone noticed that although these seven were of roughly the same height, their bodies were of different thickness. The person leading in front was a handsome youth, whose body was lean but was carrying a large sword behind his back.

Upon arriving in front of the manor, they got off their horses in unison as if they have been trained well. Six of the men stayed with their horse while holding on to the reins, while the youth passed his reins to his partner and walked forward alone. Then, he bowed Shitu Liang who was standing on the steps and said, "Excuse me, are you fierce tiger sect's hallmaster Shitu, Shitu Liang?"

Shitu Liang hurriedly returned the bow and replied, "I am, may I know who you are?"

The young man smiled as he said, "I am thousand swords peak's Qu Xiangfeng. On behalf of sect master Shitu Ping, I have come to deliver news of the former."

Shitu Liang was surprised when he heard his answer. The thousand swords peak was not something the fierce tiger sect could offend, what has happened between their sect master and thousand swords peak?

With a bitter smile, he asked, "May I know hero Qu, what evidence do you bear?"

Qu Xiangfeng did not seem offended, and he took out a plaque from his breast and passed it to Shitu Liang.

When Shitu Liang received the plaque, he saw that it was indeed sect master Shitu Ping's plaque which she carried by her side. Then, he smiled and said, "This is definitely sect master's item. Qu hero, let's talk inside. This way please."

However, he did not return the plaque to Qu Xiangfeng.

Qu Xiangfeng did not seem to mind, and the seven men walked into the manor, while their horses were naturally passed to into the care of the fierce tiger sect's members.

As they entered the main hall, the guests sat down and were served tea.

Qu Xiangfeng did not pick up his tea. Instead, he took out a letter from his breast and passed it to Shitu Liang, saying, "Sect master Shitu will not return anytime soon. I believe that the sect would miss her deeply, so she has written a letter for you, may hallmaster Shitu please read its contents."

Shitu Liang happily received the letter and opened it to read its contents. The expression on his face slowly turned to surprise, and after reading the letter, he passed it to hallmaster Zhao who was sitting beside. Hallmaster Zhao was also surprised when he read the letter, and he exchanged glances with Shitu Liang before nodding slightly.

Shitu Liang turned towards Qu Fengxiang and said, "Hero Qu, this plaque is authentic, and the handwriting in this letter does belong to our sect master. However, as for its contents, I will not be able to answer immediately. Would hero Qu rest for a moment while we take some time to discuss this matter?"

Qu Xiangfeng replied, "Of course. However, we hope that hallmaster Shitu will not make us wait too long."

After he finished his sentence, he and the other six men stood up while Shitu Liang hurriedly instructed some men to arrange some accommodation for them.

After Qu Xiangfeng left, Shitu Liang and hallmaster Zhao immediately ordered their subordinates to send an emergency signal to gather the significant members to return back to their headquarters.

After sending the signal, the two men sighed in relief; hallmaster Zhao walked to the main hall and sat down while Shitu Liang returned to his room.

Shitu Liang hurried his steps as he walked to the small house which was not far from the main hall, turned around warily, and pushed the door to enter. This room was very neat, and there was a bookshelf beside the wall that was stacked with many books. A table was positioned beside the window, and it was well furnished with writing materials. Shitu Liang walked to his table and sat on the chair. His vision was focused on the scenery outside. There were small budding leaves on the tree branches swaying with the wind and appearing full of vitality. However, Shitu Liang ignored the signs of spring, and he turned his gaze to the sky where the clouds were hung high up. After half a bell of time, he shook his head and massaged his temples, before taking out Shitu Ping's plaque to observe

under the sunlight.

Suddenly, he stood up from his chair and out the plaque on the table, before walking to the bookshelf to pick some books out. Behind the bookshelf was a small box. Shitu Liang carefully placed the box onto the table, and opened it where a small jade bottle was revealed. Then, he took a brush and performed a seemingly familiar motion to remove the bottle's seal, and dipped the brush into the jade bottle. With one hand holding up the plaque, he brushed a spot on the plaque with the liquid and indeed, in that small spot, the three words "Tolerate patiently" appeared.

After Shitu Liang kept everything into their respective positions, those three words also disappeared. He re-pocketed the plaque and sat back on his chair while deep in thought.

After a meal worth of time, the sky has already began to darken, and Shitu Liang was still sitting in the same position without any motion. Then, a gentle knock came from outside the door, and Shitu Liang responded, "Come in".

Someone lightly pushed the door open, and reported, "Hallmaster Shitu, elder Wu, hallmaster Xing and hallmaster Zhang has arrived and are currently speaking to hallmaster Zhao. Hallmaster Zhao sent me to inform you of this."

Shitu Liang said in a low voice, "Alright, I understand. I will join them soon."

Shitu Liang waited for another short while until as if his mind was made up. Then, he straightened his body, tidied up his appearance and walked out of the room.

Although the distance between his room and the main hall was not far, his steps were slow and deliberate. Even though there was no difference in his surroundings, Shitu Liang knew that the fierce tiger sect from today onwards will not be the same as the old fierce tiger sect.

Chapter 39: Learn

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Learn

When Shitu Liang entered the main hall, there were already three people discussing intensely while hallmaster Zhao was sitting quietly in his original seat, sipping some tea.

Shitu Liang's footsteps made the three pause their discussion. The three men exchanged glances, and the grey hair elderly continued to sit in his chair while the other two stood up. Of the two, one was of medium build and looked like a highly capable man, while the other was slightly taller, looked clean and neat and seemed like a forty to fifty year old wealthy man. The two walked up to Shitu Liang to welcome the latter, and the three men exchanged greetings. Shitu Liang asked, "Hallmaster Zhang, hallmaster Xing, how was your New Year?"

The wealthy-looking middle aged man replied, "Not bad, I spent my New Year with my family so it was quite meaningful. However, Xing Mou could not enjoy myself fully because I heard that hallmaster Shitu was alone in the sect."

Shitu liang waved his hands and replied, "I am a lonely bachelor, wont it be the same wherever I go? I can't possibly ask our brothers who are married to spend the New Year with me. I have also heard that brother Zhang has gotten himself a young wife just last year."

The capable looking man blushed and urgently said, "Hallmaster Shitu has wronged me. Zhang Mou am only a normal person who will succumb to the temptations, unlike hallmaster Shitu who has cut off all worldly desires like an immortal."

Upon hearing his words, Shitu Liang frowned and said, "Brother-ah, have you taken me for a monk? I am still actively looking for a partner."

When the two men heard his response, they replied, “Okay, we shall wait for that day.”

While the three men were partaking in idle talk, elder Chu who was waiting aside became impatient and coughed lightly. Upon hearing the cough, Shitu Liang hurriedly went over and paid his respect, and waited for the former’s approval before he sat down.

Even before he was fully seated, the impatient elder Chu asked, “Little Liang, has there been any news of Ping’er?”

This elder Chu was the sect’s old man, he has watched Shitu Ping and Shitu Liang grown up. On usual days, he would address the latter two by their titles sect master and hallmaster. However on that day, he was evidently anxious as he chose to call them by the way he used to in the past.

Shitu Liang felt warmth in his heart and he quickly replied, “Elder Chu, nothing bad has happened to my elder cousin. She is just unable to return to the sect for now.”

Elder Chu continued to ask, “Then what is going on right now? Sect master has always handles matters with decorum, something big must have happened for her to be missing while unaccounted for. When I asked old Zhao, he refused to say anything until you come out, so the two of you should stop beating about the bush and tell me what you know quickly.”

Shitu Liang nodded and took out the letter from his breast, before standing up and passing it to elder Chu.

Elder Chu received the letter and read it carefully while frowning. After he was done, hallmaster Xing and Zhang took turns to read the letter.

Elder Chu was the first to speak up. He asked, “Little Liang, is this letter real?”

Shitu Liang nodded and said, “This is indeed elder cousin’s handwriting, and the timing matches, so the letter should be genuine.”

Hallmaster Zhang then continued, “But why would thousand swords peak recruit our sect master to be a disciple of theirs? Sect master has already passed the age that is most suitable for learning martial arts, and now that she is under thousand swords peak, how can we raise our heads in the future?”

Hallmaster Xing also said, “And the most suspicious part is when our sect master authorize the disciples of thousand swords peak to be her proxy, what is the meaning of that?”

Shitu Liang replied, “If our sect master has become a disciple of thousand swords peak, then we would naturally become a branch of theirs. By rights, this should be a matter of joy for the fierce tiger sect, otherwise, we would not be able to get such an opportunity even if we pray every day. If our sect master is unable to return immediately, then it may be because she is currently learning some profound martial technique.”

Elder Chu wrinkled his brows and said, “We are but a fly to the thousand swords peak, what would they see in us? Why would they even send a few disciples to take over us? I don’t think we are worthy of that much attention.”

Hallmaster Zhao pondered for a while, and said, “There are too many dubious points in this matter. It will still be best if we wait for sect master to return and relay her orders personally. Otherwise, won’t we be taking the matter too lightly by allowing some random people to take over us with a letter?”

Shitu Liang smiled bitterly and asked, “Then what should we do? Do we even have the power to object if we refuse to endure this humiliation?” The word ‘endure’ was especially emphasized.

The others could not answer him. Indeed, what can they do? Any schemes or resistance could crumble in the face of indomitable power.

However...

Seeing that everyone had turned silent, elder Chu asked, “Where are the thousand swords peak disciples?”

Shitu Liang replied, “We have arranged for them to rest. They should have eaten their dinner by now.”

Elder Chu said, “Then call them over so we can meet and discuss in greater in detail.”

Shitu Liang nodded and sent his men to invite Qu Xiangfeng and his men over.

Not long after, the seven men from thousand swords peak arrived in the main

hall together.

The people from fierce tiger sect went forward to pay their respects, and after exchanging their greetings, everyone returned to their seats.

Elder Chu asked in a gentle tone, “Hero Qu, we are a rural and poor village from the hills and would thus lack comfort. Are you and your men adjusting well?”

Qu Xiangfeng quickly replied, “Elder Chu is too polite, we have traveled across Jianghu and are used to eating and living simply. Therefore, we have no problems adjusting to here.”

Elder Chu stroked his beard and said, “That is good to know.”

Then, he asked again, “Can Hero Qu explain in detail the current situation of our sect master?”

Qu Xiangfeng smiled and said, “Senior sister Shitu is fortunate to have caught the eye of our thousand swords peak’s elder Yun Feng, and have become his personal disciple. She is currently in training, and since elder Yun is one of the top experts in our sect, I believe that her martial skills should have improved by leaps and bounds. As for the more intricate details, I am not too sure of them myself, and it would be better for senior sister Shitu to come back and explain personally.”

His explanation was clear and detailed, so nobody had any further questions to ask.

Qu Xiangfeng saw that everyone was remaining silent so he continued, “My party and I are here because of our orders to take over the leading of the sect’s affairs, but I wonder how all of you are feeling about it?”

Even though the words were directed to everyone, Qu Xiangfeng maintained his gaze predominantly on elder Chu who was sitting down.

Elder Chu saw that Qu Xiangfeng’s gaze was upon him, and just as he was about to answer, someone cut his words.

“Hero Qu wants all of us to listen to your orders based on a letter, how can I be satisfied with the situation?”

Qu Xiangfeng turned his head and saw that it was hallmaster Xing who spoke. He asked, “Then what does hallmaster Xing suggest?”

Hallmaster Xing replied, “You have to at least overcome the obstacle that is me, and let me experience the famed sword techniques of the thousand swords peak.”

Elder Chu hurriedly tried to stop him and said, “Hallmaster Xing, you are not allowed to be so rude.”

Qu Xiangfeng said, “There is no harm done. It is indeed very unfair for all of you to listen to our orders just because things turned out this way, I shall accept hallmaster Xing’s proposal to exchange some pointers so that he will submit to me willingly.”

Hallmaster Shitu quickly said, “Hero Qu, hallmaster Xing, we are all on the same side now, so let’s not go too far with a formal fight. Instead, we can just exchange a few strikes in the hall, and not spoil the friendliness between us, okay?”

Both men nodded in agreement.

Hallmaster Xing shouted to the men outside, “Bring my weapon over.”

Not long after, a person brought in a one point eight zhang* iron spear, which was hallmaster Xing’s weapon.

*TN note: one zhang is about 3.5m

Hallmaster Xing received the spear using one hand, and exerted some strength to thrust the spear repeatedly, causing a “Wu Wu” sound for each thrust, while the men in the fierce tiger sect all thought in their hearts “Even though this hallmaster Xing’s body is quite fat, he did not relax in his training and has made some improvements in these few days.”

however, the expressions of the men from thousand swords peak remained unchanged.

Qu Xiangfeng drew out a large blade from his back. While using one hand to carry his weapon as well, he walked to the center of the main hall.

When hallmaster Xing saw Qu Xiangfeng’s actions, he became slightly wary of

the later. While there are as many blade users in Jianghu as there are hair on a cow, only few would use a blade of this size. Furthermore, the blade did not seem light, and since Qu Xiangfeng is able to carry it in one hand, his arm strength must be unordinary.

While these thoughts were running through hallmaster Xing's mind, Qu Xiangfeng said, "Hallmaster Xing, please go ahead."

Hallmaster Xing did not pretend to be courteous and replied, "Okay hero Qu, watch out for my spear."

After finishing his sentence, both his hands gripped on the spear and he jumped forward, aiming the spear at Qu Xiangfeng's heart. Qu Xiangfeng was not anxious, he waited until the spear was approaching his body when he side-stepped and bent his waist, while using a single hand to swing the blade to parry the oncoming spear upwards.

In the flash of an eye, both spear and blade collided, and the loud metallic clash could be heard. Qu Xiangfeng's blade recoiled from the spear, while the hallmaster was pushed back three steps before he regained his balance. By then, he saw Qu Xiangfeng's blade already heading towards him while using the momentum of the previous clash. Hallmaster Xing had no time to adjust his stance and could only try to defend against the oncoming attack, and with another metallic sound, the sword recoiled again. However, Qu Xiangfeng did not make any attempt to continue his strike. He leisurely stood there and looked as his opponent stepped four steps back before falling onto the ground. This time, hallmaster Xing could no longer hold on to his weapon; it was thrown aside and after he stood up, he realized that his palms were already scrapped from the impact. His heart suddenly felt frightened "This skinny body contains an enormous hidden strength. Fortunately, we were only exchanging pointers, if this was a real fight, my life would definitely be forfeited."

Seeing hallmaster Xing's expression that was downcast like mud, Qu Xiangfeng cupped his fists and said "Good fight."

Hallmaster Xing returned the gesture and said, "Your skills are truly admirable."

Chapter 40: Handover

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Handover

The exchange between the two men cannot be said to be flashy or exciting, but the winner was clearly determined within a few breaths of time. This led the jaws of fierce tiger sect men to drop whereas the six onlookers from thousand swords peak had their usual expression on their faces.

Hallmaster Xing sat back on his chair with a blank expression on as though he still has not woken from the shock of his loss. Shitu Liang did not go forward to comfort him; their heads were still digesting the previous scene. These people from thousand swords peak suddenly appeared to take over the leadership of the sect, and given their power, everyone had no choice but to follow their will. When he saw that the representative was a young man, he wanted to demonstrate some of their prowess in order to warn the latter from belittling their sect. Thus, they did not stop hallmaster Xing from proceeding with the exchange of pointers. However, the result was too far from their expectations. Hallmaster Xing was clearly defeated within three stokes, and when he replayed the scene in his head, he realized that each stroke as meticulously planned to force his opponent to face him head on. There was no profound methods in his movement, it was simple, direct and a good show of his power. He knew that even if it was someone else who went up to spar, they would still be faced with the same outcome.

No wonder the thousand swords peak only sent seven men, these seven were already able to hold their own against more than half of the fierce tiger sect by themselves.

Seeing the dark expressions on the faces of the fierce tiger sect members, Qu Xiangfeng did not gave them much time to recover as he waved the sword in his

hands and announced, “Everyone listen, if anyone still feels that they have something to say, please come forward now to say it.”

Shitu Liang and the other hallmasters exchanged glances before elder Chu stood up and said, “Hero Qu, please keep your sword. We have no more objections.”

Qu Xiangfeng saw that it was elder Chu who spoke up, and he immediately kept the sword back onto his back. However, he did not return to his seat, and instead faced towards the members of the fierce tiger sect to reaffirm their response, “Is there really no one who is still unhappy with thousand swords peak taking control of fierce tiger sect?”

Shitu Liang paused slightly before everyone answered in unison, “Yes, we will follow our sect master’s orders and listen to thousand swords peak’s hero Qu’s command.”

Then, Shitu Liang invited Qu Xiangfeng up to the sect master’s seat and said, “Would sect master Qu take his seat. We shall await for your command.”

Qu Xiangfeng did not bother to be wishy washy, he immediately took the seat and said to the rest of fierce tiger sect’s members, “Everyone please be seated.”

Thus, everyone returned to their seats.

Qu Xiangfeng continued to speak, “Everyone do not have to be anxious, I am only following the orders of my sect master and will be taking charge of fierce tiger sect temporarily. All matters of the sect will be handed back to sect master Shitu after she comes back, and even when she is not around, there is still the elder Chu, hallmaster Shitu the rest who will be remaining in their positions. I will not interfere with any affairs of the sect, and only ask for hallmaster Shitu to inform me before making any major decisions.”

Everyone felt puzzled in their hearts, what does this count as? Taking the position of the sect leader but not using any of its power nor caring about any of the sect’s affairs. When hallmaster Xing looked at the scraps on his palms, he felt that he had thrown away his image within the sect for nothing. However, his opponent had his own reasons; someone of his stature would place his eye on the entire world and not be concerned with a chick that not even hatched. This Qu Xiangfeng did not even volunteer to come into this position, he was sent here

on his own sect master's orders, which is why he did not want to involve himself in the matters of the sect.

Realizing this, an expression of understanding appeared in everyone's faces.

Seeing that his audience has realized his intentions, Qu Xiangfeng did not want to stay in the main hall any longer, so he said, "I would entrust the affairs of the sects to you while I will be staying the room which you assigned to me this afternoon during this period. If there is no matter, please do not disturb our training." After he finished his sentence, he cupped his hands and the party of seven returned back to their accommodations.

When they reached their quarters, Qu Xiangfeng instructed one from his party of seven to stand guard by the door while the rest entered the room. With a pleased smile on his face, he said to the remaining five people, "The matter of the fierce tiger sect leadership is henceforth settled. We will be staying here for the following period of time until our sect master calls us back. My two junior brothers Wang, both of you shall take a good rest tonight and go to Lu town tomorrow. Carefully watch out for any members of Jianghu, and inform me of their appearance immediately if found." Two of the men cupped their first in acknowledgment.

Then, Qu Xiangfeng said to the rest of his party, "The rest of you will do as what we usually would in the sect. Continue to train your martial arts and do not slack in your practice."

Everyone replied in acknowledgment, and scattered to their respective rooms.

Shitu Liang and the rest were deep in ponder in the main hall. After half a bell worth of time, elder Chu spoke up to ask, "Little Liang, where have you arranged hero Qu and his men to stay?" He had not addressed the man as the sect master.

Shitu Liang replied, "In the east rooms one to seven."

Elder Chu said, "It would be better to let them stay in the guest room."

Shitu Liang agreed and replied, "Yes, I will immediately instruct some men to settle this matter. I was distracted when I saw the letter, and had not handled the matter of their accommodation properly."

Elder Chu continued to say, “How about this, since everyone is tired, we shall go back to rest and discuss this again tomorrow morning.”

Thus, everyone scattered back to their own places.

Shitu Liang walked neither fast or slowly back to his little room. He did not light the oil lamp and walked in the he darkness around the familiar room before closing the door tightly. He walked to his table and stood there while looking outside his window, watching the moon being slowly covered by the dark clouds. After quite some time, he lit his oil lamp and a pea sized flame illuminated the entire room. Then, Shitu Liang took his brush and paper out and carefully began to write a letter. Then, again with great caution, he rolled it up and placed it into a gold cased loop, and repeated the same steps with two empty paper rolls, then kept the three gold cased loops into his breast and blew out the oil lamp, before walking out of his room.

Shitu Liang did not go far, he walked straight into a slightly larger room nearby. Upon opening the door, the sounds of pigeons could be heard.

He walked into a corner of the room with great familiarity, found three slightly smaller pigeons, and opened the cage. Then, he took out the three loops from his breast and tied one to a pigeon in a much practiced way. Finally, he opened the window and let the first pigeon fly from its cage. When the pigeon was in the air, it seemed to hesitate and returned back to the window sill. Shitu Liang caught the pigeon and threw it into the air again, and this time, it flew away towards a direction.

Shitu Liang did not immediately free the second pigeon. He waited quietly for the time it takes to boil a kettle of tea, and seeing that there was no other movement, he set freed the second pigeon. He then repeated his actions for the third pigeon.

Qu Xiangfeng and his party were staying a room that was quite a distance from the pigeon’s coop, which was basically the opposite direction from the main hall. Thus, they did not notice the movements of that area. As for the rest of the fierce tiger sect, they were already familiar with the flying of courier pigeons, so these pigeons did not attract any further attention from them.

After finishing this particular task, Shitu Liang returned to his room and

without even lighting his lamp, he went back to his bed and fell asleep.

The whole fierce tiger sect was quiet under the moonlight, only some of the more important members were walking around while rubbing their sleepy eyes.

Everyone else was fast asleep, preoccupied with their dreams.

Within the courtyard of the Zhang household in the Guo village, everyone was also fast asleep. Except, low coughing sounds could be heard coming from the grandmother's room.

The grandmother was lying on the platform, using the covers to muffle the sounds of her coughs. Occasionally, she would strain her ears over to Zhang Xiaohua's side to check for any movement. Even though the moonlight from the window was bright and clear, the room was still dark and there were no movements of sorts on Zhang Xiaohua's side. Nevertheless, the grandmother was worried that she would wake her beloved grandson up and spoil his sweet dreams. However at that moment, she felt a burning sensation in her chest that was inducing her to cough. She could not leave the room, and yet she did not want to disturb her grandson, so what else is left for her to do?

The thing that made her relieved was that Zhang Xiaohua was still sleeping like a log. She thought, perhaps she can tell the children's mother tomorrow to allow her to stay in their relative's woodshed where she would be more at ease. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua turned his body, and the grandmother immediately covered her mouth and pushed the cough which was coming out even harder back in. However, how could she have suppressed the cough? Her throat was itching, and her face was uncomfortably warm, and upon hearing no more noise from Zhang Xiaohua, she carefully let out the cough. However, the cough was suppressed for a while, so this cough was even worse, so much so that the grandmother felt her phlegm being coughed onto her quilt.

The grandmother did not managed to sleep for almost the whole night, and she waited for the cock outside to crow several times before getting up and creeping out of the room. The courtyard was still very quiet, the grandmother did not hear any other sounds. She did not go far, and instead sat on the wall outside her room, and used a towel to suppress the persistent cough.

After some time, the grandmother heard the sound of the main room door

opening. A person walked out, and she then heard Guo Sufei's voice, "Mother, why are you up so early? It is cold outside."

Guo Sufei walked over and wanted to support the grandmother back into the room, but the latter refused to even over her dead body. She said, "I keep coughing, and am afraid of waking Xiaohua up."

Guo Sufei's eyes turned red and said, "Mother, you should then come to the common room."

Then, she supported the grandmother back into the common room, and at this moment, Liu Qing also woke up. She saw Guo Sufei supporting the grandmother over to the room, and quickly helped to open the door for the two women.

Hearing the grandmother's persistent cough, she thought in her heart, "Whether or not the spring water has an effect, grandmother's illness is still getting worse."

Chapter 41: Wish

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Wish

A new day began, and the whole family was busy doing their own respective tasks.

The grandmother was sitting in the courtyard enjoying the rare sunlight.

Seeing that the weather was exceptionally good and the sun bright, Guo Sufei decided to air the blankets in the house. She first took the blankets from her room and Zhang Xiaolong's room out to hang on a rope, before heading towards the grandmother's room to collect the grandmother and Zhang Xiaolong's blankets. However, a while after she stepped in the room, everyone who was outside heard a yelp coming out. The grandmother's ears were sharp and she asked, "What has happened? Sufei?" then, Guo Sufei's voice could be heard from inside the room, "It is nothing mother, there was a rat."

Zhang Cai who was arranging the farming tools laughed and said, "Such a grown person still being afraid of a little thing, you sure are funny."

Zhang Xiaohua also heard his mother's reply and he rushed over excitedly and asked, "Mother, where is the rat? I will help you, I am the best at catching rats."

However, once he entered the room, he saw his mother who was sitting at his grandmother's bed with this grandmother's quilt in her hands while crying softly. Faced with the scene before him, Zhang Xiaohua carefully walked over and whispered, "Mother, what is the problem?"

Guo Sufei continued to cry listlessly while ignoring him.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the quilt in his mother's hands, and realized that there was a patch of black stain on it. Not understanding the situation, he asked

his mother again, “Mother, are you going to sun this blanket? If it is dirty, I will help you wash it, alright?”

Hearing her obedient son’s words, Guo Sufei grew even sadder and in a hoarse voice, she said, “Xiaohua, this blanket is not dirty, it is the blood that your grandmother coughed out.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt as if a weight has fallen onto his brain. While still feeling shocked, he asked, “Then, is grandmother going to die?”

Hearing the innocent and direct words from her son, Guo Sufei felt as if her heart has eaten something bitter and she replied, “Good boy, mother does not know as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua face started to distort as he said, “I do not want grandmother to die.”

Guo Sufei extended her hands to embrace her son, and she stroked his head as she said, “Mother doesn’t wish for it to happen to. However, look at Xiaohua, he is growing up soon quickly that he will soon reach up to mother’s height. Mother has grown old, and grandmother will leave us soon too.”

Zhang Xiaohua almost burst into tears as he said, “I don’t want to grow taller, mother, I don’t want grandmother to leave me.”

By this time, Guo Sufei has somewhat managed her emotions and she hugged her son tighter and sighed deeply.

Zhang Xiaohua then thought of the conversation he had with Liu Qing, and asked, “Mother, elder sister Liu told me that there are immortals in this world that do not die. Will grandmother not need to leave us anymore if I find them?”

Guo Sufei replied, “Perhaps, Xiaohua. That is what the stories say, but no one has ever seen these immortals before.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “Then I will go and find an immortal now, and beg them to save grandmother.”

Guo Sufei said tenderly, “Good boy.”

Then, she looked at her son, and saw his anxious expression and watery eyes, and said, “Nobody knows where do the immortals live at, where will you go to

find them? Furthermore, it is too late if you only start looking for them now. Instead, you should spend more time with your grandmother, and let the old lady hear your voice more often.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded when he heard his mother’s words, as though he understood them.

At that moment, Zhang Cai shouted, “Xiaohua, have you caught the rat yet?”

Guo Sufei yelled back, “It already ran away, how do we catch it like that?”

Then, she said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Let’s go out now. However, do not cry again, and do not let your grandmother know.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head in agreement.

Guo Sufei carried the blankets as she walked out of the room, while Zhang Xiaohua followed behind her with his head lowered.

Guo Sufei continued to sun the blankets, while Zhang Xiaohua walked over to his grandmother’s side and asked, “Grandmother, are you thirsty? Can I get you some water?”

The grandmother smiled and said, “En, I am feeling slightly thirsty. Xiaohua go get grandmother a cup of water, good boy, and be careful not to scald yourself.”

It was as if in grandmother’s heart, Zhang Xiaohua was still a four to five year old boy. Zhang Xiaohua went into the house to get his grandmother a cup of water.

Guo Sufei originally wanted to hide the grandmother’s quilt somewhere, but she then thought otherwise. Thus, she took a water basin and drew some water. Liu Qing saw Guo Sufei’s actions and hurriedly went over to help, but when she saw the stain on the blanket, she stood there in shock. Seeing Liu Qing’s reaction, Guo Sufei thought a bit and said in a low voice, “Go get Xiaolong and the rest over, covertly.”

Liu Qing nodded her head, and went over to signal the men to come out. When everyone had arrived and saw the stain that Guo Sufei was washing off, they stood there wordlessly. Even the warmth of the sun was not able to melt the chill in their hearts.

Zhang Xiaohua brought the water over to the grandmother, sipped a bit to test its temperature before putting it into the grandmother's hands. The grandmother drank the water deliciously when she received it, and a beaming smile appeared on her face as though she was drinking the sweetest honey water. She then let out a deep sigh, and her coughs became gentler.

Everyone saw the heartwarming scene in front of their eyes which melt the chill in their hearts as they realized they should do next. Then, they all walked to the grandmother's side and continued with their tasks while looking at her, as though they wanted to carve her smiling face onto their own hearts. The grandmother was unaware of the actions of the rest of the family, and she remained seated peacefully on the chair while enjoying the warmth of the sun, feeling very fortunate for herself.

Guo Sufei hurriedly washed the quilt and sun it, before sitting beside the grandmother and said warmly, "Mother, what would you like for lunch? I will prepare it for you."

The grandmother pondered for a while, and then replied, "Five spiced meat."

Guo Sufei asked curiously, "Mother, don't you usually avoid such oily dishes?"

The grandmother said, "I am feeling hungrier today, so I want to eat a little."

Guo Sufei then said, "Fine, I will go out to the village to buy some meat later."

Zhang Xiaolong immediately said, "Mother, let me go instead. I should exercise more body more."

Guo Sufei agreed, and Liu Qing added, "I will follow you along. You should stop carrying heavy things with your arm, or it will affect your recovery."

Zhang Xiaolong laughed, "I am only buying two jin* of meat, why wouldn't I be able to carry it?"

Liu Qing smiled wordlessly, and the couple both went out together.

The grandmother squinted her eyes as though trying to imagine the scene of them walking out together. Then, she turned to Guo Sufei and said, "Sufei-ah, I have something to say."

Guo Sufei replied, "Sure mother. Wait a while, I will help you get some water

to smooth your throat.”

Guo Sufei then poured another cup of water for the grandmother, and moved the stool and sat in front of the latter before asking, “Mother, what is the matter?”

The grandmother asked, “Sufei-ah, was there something I spat out on my blanket?”

An expression of shock appeared on Guo Sufei’s face, and she immediately said, “No, mother. There was nothing, it was a little dirty so I washed it clean.”

The grandmother sighed again and said, “Sufei-ah, you do not have to hide it from me. It was something I vomited out, how could I not know what it is. I was just unable to ascertain it, but you let Little Cai and the rest see it just now. I heard so and naturally I can understand what happened.”

Guo Sufei reassured her, “Mother, you do not have to think too much. Your cough will definitely get better.”

The grandmother smiled as she said, “You silly child, how could you be like Xiaohua. You are already forty to fifty years old, yet you still try to comfort your mother like this.”

Guo Sufei wiped her tears which were beginning to form again, and said, “Mother.....”

The grandmother continued, “Sufei-ah, you need to learn to let go. Illness and death are unavoidable matters. When your father left us, I was also upset for a long time before I broke out of my despair, and you were neglected by me during that period. Now that I am leaving, I have caused you to feel upset again, sigh. However, there is not much I can do about it. You father and I have worked our whole lives yet we were unable to give you much. With Xiao Cai looking after you, and Xiaolong, Xiaohu and Xiaohua being such sensible children, I would feel more relieved leaving you behind. After I am gone, do not let them miss me too much and concentrate on their own fields, I will beg the gods from below to look after all of you.”

Zhang Xiaohua listened to his grandmother until his heart melted. He hugged his grandmother and said, “Grandmother, do not worry, I will take good care of

mother.”

The grandmother stroked Zhang Xiaohua’s hair and said tenderly, “I know that Xiaohua will grow to become a good strong man who will protect this family.”

Then, the grandmother said, “Sufei-ah, I do not have many wishes in my whole life. Seeing you have Xiao Cai living happily without any arguments has made me appeased already. However, not being able to see Xiaolong get married, or to hold my great grandson makes me regret leaving you all. This Liu Qing is a very good girl, you must find ways to get her to marry into our family, and it will be to our Xiaolong’s fortune.”

Everyone surrounded the grandmother to listen to her words, and they were so distracted by their sadness that they did not notice two people walk through the courtyard entrance. When the two people heard the two words, “Liu Qing”, they stopped in their tracks and strained their ears to listen to the grandmother’s speech.

Guo Sufei continued to say, “Mother, you are right. Li Qing is a very good child, there is nothing to pick on her mannerism and behavior, and her appearances are one in a hundred. If she would be willing to marry our Xiaolong then we would have to thank the karma from his previous life, but.....”

Guo Sufei broke off in the middle of her sentence, she did not want to dash her mother’s beautiful dream. However, there was indeed a large difference in their families’ backgrounds, if she promised to fulfill her mother’s wish but was unable to see it through, then wouldn’t her mother become unhappy after she passed on?

The grandmother seemed to know what she wanted to say. She patted Guo Sufei’s hands and said, “Sufei-ah. Liu Qing is not a girl who looks for riches and comfort; if she likes our family’s Xiaolong then she would have married him. Teacher Liu is also a reasonable man, and I believe that he will approve their union. You should find some time to listen to Li Qing’s opinions. If she is uninterested in our family’s Xiaolong then we can drop this matter, and let her return home as soon as possible. Otherwise, it will not be good for her to spend so much time with us, we may have saved her but her debt has already been fully settled, and teacher Liu’s household would need her too.”

Guo Sufei replied, “Okay, mother. I will ask Liu Qing tomorrow, and let her go home immediately.”

Upon listening, a sad expression appeared on the grandmother’s face.

At this moment, a person ran in from outside and said, “Qingqing is not going home.”

*TN: 1 jin= 0.5kg

Chapter 42: Propose

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Propose

The person who came back was Zhang Xiaolong.

When the couple heard the conversation between the grandmother and mother, Liu Qing's face turned red in embarrassment while Zhang Xiaolong observed her expression as he continued to listen. When he saw the disappointed face on his grandmother, he could bear no longer and pulled Liu Qing's hands while rushing into the courtyard to say spiritedly, "Qingqing is not going home."

Liu Qing's face was flushed as she thought to withdraw her hands, but for some reason, she did not do so and obediently followed Zhang Xiaolong into the courtyard. While she was running, she thought in her heart, "Thank goodness that this thin layer of paper has finally been pierced though. She had been worrying all this time on what to say when Guo Sufei finally catches herself to sit down and talk. Now that Zhang Xiaolong has impulsively extinguished the fire, he had saved herself the inconvenience of living through that experience. This Zhang Xiaolong is just like a lucky star, or was it fated again?"

Everyone looked at the absurd couple who ran into the courtyard, and when the latter stood in front of the grandmother, they noticed that Zhang Xiaolong was holding on to Liu Qing's hands with a confident expression on his face. When he noticed the weird gaze they everyone had on him, he then noticed that he was holding on to Liu Qing's soft hands and suddenly felt unsure on whether to hold on to his grip or let go.

Seeing her son becoming embarrassed, Guo Sufei asked, "Xiaolong, what you said about Qingqing not going back, was that her own idea?"

Zhang Xiaolong pulled his face not knowing how to answer. When the hand he was holding on to used its fingers to rub softly against his, he got the hint and said happily, "Yes, mother. Qingqing told me personally."

Everyone broke out in joy, even the grandmother was smiling from ear to ear.

Guo Sufei walked towards Liu Qing and asked in a tone of disbelief, "Qingqing, this matter concerns your future happiness, you must think carefully to avoid any future regrets."

No one stopped her because they knew that Guo Sufei was reaffirming Liu Qing's intentions, and Liu Qing herself was happy because she felt that everyone was being honest. In fact, those words should have come from her family instead. Liu Qing also knew that she could not be vague with her answer this time, so she finally nodded her head, before breaking free of Zhang Xiaolong's grasp and escaping outside.

Seeing her response, Guo Sufei nudged her so and said, "Still not chasing?"

Zhang Xiaolong replied as though he just woke from a dream, "Erm, yes."

But just as he took a few steps forward, he turned around and said, "Father, give me some coins. We forgot to bring some when we went out to buy meat."

Zhang Cai hurriedly took out some coins from his breast and pressed them onto his son. The latter took the money and immediately ran off to chase after the shadow of Liu Qing who was obviously waiting for him.

Hearing Zhang Xiaolong's footsteps turning lighter, the grandmother smiled and said, "This child truly has good fate, not carrying coins out could even become an opportunity for him. When I heard your words earlier, I even thought that he had no more chance with Qingqing anymore."

Guo Sufei also said happily, "That's right. The previous time I asked Qingqing about this, she still seemed to be unwilling, and I didn't even know how to go about asking her the second time. Fortunately, all these problems are settled now."

Zhang Cai was also excited, and he said, "Xiaohua, go to the village and get me some wine so I can celebrate properly."

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Okay."

Then, he got up and ran. After he ran for quite a distance, Guo Sufei asked, "Have you given Xiaohua the coins yet?"

Zhang Cai replied dejectedly, "No, I'll wait till he comes back."

For the next few days, the Zhang household was a bundle of joy. Liu Qing would turn red every time she saw Zhang Xiaolong and try to avoid him, while Zhang Xiaolong would appear flustered and freeze on the spot. The whole family had fun watching the two turned embarrassed while indulging in the sweet atmosphere of the budding relationship.

The grandmother's mood has also improved, except that she became skinnier as the days went past. Guo Sufei was feeling happy for her son, yet feeling upset about her mother, and the two conflicting emotions were like ice and fire in her heart.

While other people could not be certain of the grandmother's condition, Zhang Xiaohua could feel that she was getting worse. On this day, he could not bear to do nothing so he told Guo Sufei secretly, "Mother, I have something to tell you."

Guo Sufei looked at her youngest son's suspicious movements and asked, "What trouble did you get into? Acting all suspiciously like that."

Zhang Xiaohua replied in mock anger, "Mother, when had I given you any trouble?"

Guo Sufei stroke his head and smiled while saying, "Then what is the matter?"

Zhang Xiaohua said hurtfully, "Mother, I can feel something floating away from grandmother's body. The more of it floats off, the thinner grandmother becomes, and I can feel that grandmother doesn't have much of these things anymore."

Guo Sufei said angrily, "You little rascal, do not thrash talk."

Zhang Xiaohua insisted self-righteously, "It is true, mother. I really felt it, and I have ever told elder sister Qingqing, and she believed me."

"Ah.....what did your elder sister Qingqing say?" Guo Sufei asked curiously.

“Elder sister Qingqing said that it is because grandmother dotes on me the most, and I cared the most about her too, which is why I am able to feel the condition of her body. However, she said that it is difficult to explain, although people who are closed to each other would be able to understand.” Zhang Xiaohua replied naturally.

Upon hearing his reply, Guo Sufei immediately got up, left Zhang Xiaohua by himself and looked for Zhang Cai. Seeing that his mother had taken him seriously, he felt happy in his heart and then went over to accompany his grandmother.

Guo Sufei met Zhang Cai and recounted Zhang Xiaohua’s words to him. Zhang Cai pondered for a moment, and replied, “I have heard of these things before, maybe Xiaohua is telling the truth. It seems that we have to make some preparations right now.”

Guo Sufei listened and nodded her head feeling disheartened.

However, she immediately asked Zhang Cai again, “What should we do about Qingqing and Xiaolong? My mother wishes to see Xiaolong get married, but if she really passes away before then, the matter about Xiaolong and Qingqing would have to be pushed back.”

Zhang Cai said, “Why don’t we go over to Liu Qing’s household in a few days to propose? If we are able to rush their marriage before mother passes on, then that would be the best case scenario. If not, then we can at least confirm their engagement.”

Guo Sufei nodded her head and replied, “Then I will ask Qingqing for her opinion.”

That night, Guo Sufei told Liu Qing about their intention to propose the marriage to her father. Although she was expecting Liu Qing to postpone the matter, Liu Qing approved the idea somewhat embarrassingly which made Guo Sufei feel relief. Guo Sufei could tell that Liu Qing was someone who how to pick out the important matters. Knowing that the grandmother wanted to see the union of her and Xiaolong, she chose not to dally on the matter and made a significant decision which would affect her whole life. However, her actions also made Guo Sufei feel that this daughter-in-law that her family has gotten to be

the best daughter-in-law in the world.

On the next day, Zhang Cai prepared many presents and brought Zhang Xiaohua to Liu Qing's house in Bali Gou to propose. Zhang Xiaohua was very happy, he had also missed butcher Liu's wife and the five spiced meat.

There was some distance between Guo village and Bali Gou, Zhang Cai and Xiaohua did not take their time and by the time they reached the village's entrance, it was three poles after morning. Zhang Cai's body which had just recovered was still unused to the exercise, so he sat on a rock outside the village to rest. Zhang Xiaohua did not seem to be even the least tired, his breathing was still even, which made Zhang Cai envious of the youngster's body. Actually, Zhang Xiaohua was also breathless the first time he came over, and was even more exhausted than how Zhang Cai is now, although he did not show any sign of exertion during this trip.

After some rest, the two picked got up again and following Zhang Xiaohua's lead, they reached to teacher Liu's house.

Teacher Liu's house was unchanged from the previous time and the door was open. Zhang Xiaohua shouted for long while but there was no reply from inside. Thinking that the house was empty, he brought Zhang Cai in to move the presents into the house. When they entered the courtyard, Zhang Cai noticed that there were all types of flowers and vegetation planted, and even though they have yet to bloom, he could see the refined taste of the owner. The scene made him feel depressed, because he could not provide such an environment for his own children and only an environment like this could nurture a child as exemplary as Liu Qing. It also made him anticipate for the future, if his own courtyard could be similar, then the house would be a nice environment for him to retire and feel satisfied. As Zhang Cai was thinking about the courtyard, Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts were much simpler. Since the door was unlocked, there should be someone in, but despite his calls from outside, no one came to welcome them so they must be busy. However, what would these learned people be busy with? Nothing apart from writing and painting; Zhang Xiaohua ever heard Liu Qing said that her house has a study room at the side of the main room, so perhaps teacher Liu was in the study room.

Sure enough, in the room at the right wing was a familiar silhouette, who was

indeed teacher Liu. His back was to the door, and was writing something on his desk. Zhang Xiaohua pulled his father who was about to walk to the main room and pointed to teacher Liu's back. Zhang Cai then stopped in his tracks, and followed Zhang Xiaohua to the room teacher Liu was in. Just as Zhang Xiaohua was about to enter, Zhang Cai stopped him and made a gesture to keep silent. Zhang Xiaohua understood his father's intentions, the latter was afraid of disturbing teacher Liu. Thus, the two men stood at the door for a while, and just as Zhang Xiaohua was about to talk to his father out of boredom, footsteps suddenly appeared from outside; the two men turned around to see Liu Qing's elder brother Liu Kai return home.

When Liu Kai entered through the door and saw the two men standing in the courtyard, a smile appeared on his face when he realized who they were. He immediately went up to greet them, and seeing his father who was busy in the study room, he apologized, "My father is just like that. When he is busy with his own things, he will become oblivious to his surroundings. He will naturally come out once he is done, would uncle follow me to the main room instead?" After receiving the presents, Liu Kai courteously led the two men into the main room and poured them tea.

After walking for almost the whole morning, Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua were thirsty and they gulped down the drink while thinking, "This tea is indeed not as nice as the one in our house."

Seeing the two men finished their tea, he let them rest for a while before asking, "Why did uncle come to our house, did Qingqing not return with you? Is she fine?"

Zhang Cai quickly answered, "Qingqing did not return with us today, she is living well with us. The reason why I came was because I had a matter to discuss with teacher Liu."

Chapter 43: Refusal

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Refusal

Liu Kai asked casually, "What is the matter about?"

Zhang Cai smiled as he replied, "I will discuss it with teacher Liu in a short while."

Liu Kai smiled as he nodded, and then asked Zhang Cai a string of questions relating to his sister. Zhang Cai also answered each and every question, while Zhang Xiaohua dropped many praises of Liu Qing, which made Liu Kai who was listening attentively break out into smiles.

Liu Kai sat with Zhang Cai for a while, and seeing that the day was getting late, he said to Zhang Cai, "Uncle and Xiaohua can wait here for a while because I am not sure when my father will be done with his things., it is better to go over to my uncle's place to have lunch."

Zhang Cai waved his hands and said, "Nephew does not have to stand on the ceremony, we can eat something casual."

Liu Kai stood up and said, "I can't do that. Uncle has specially made a trip over to our house, I should play a better host to you. I still remember that Xiaohua loves roast meat, so I will make sure to let him have his fill of it for lunch."

Zhang Xiaohua said while salivating, "Then I will thank elder brother Liu in advance."

Liu Kai smiled and replied, "You little honey tongued devil." Then, he left quickly while Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua remained in the house.

The two drank some tea as they waited but teacher Liu still did not come out even after some time.

At this moment, a bright voice came from outside the house, “Old brother Zhang, you have finally come.”

Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua exchanged smiles, this new arrival could only be butcher Liu.

Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua both stood up hurriedly and just as they were about to get the door, he heard the sounds of healthy footsteps. Butcher Liu grabbed Zhang Cai’s hand welcomingly and said, “Old brother Zhang-ah, I have really missed you. How is your leg now? En, seeing you here, it should have recovered fully.”

Zhang Cai smiled as he replied, “Yes, thanks to your grace. While walking over this afternoon, I did not have any problems with my leg.”

Butcher Liu said, “Good people will have good things come their way. Old brother Zhang is a good man, he would definitely have good fortune. Oh right, how are the injuries of your two sons?”

Zhang Cai replied, “Xiaohu has fully recovered while Xiaolong would be joining him soon.”

Butcher Liu said, “That would be for the best. It is farming season soon, I was still worrying about it. Come, let’s continue our conversation in the room.”

Everyone then reseated themselves in the room, and just as he sat, teacher Liu also entered. Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua stood up immediately to pay their greetings which teacher Liu returned. Then, teacher Liu said, “Old brother Zhang has been here for almost half the day while I was working on my painting, I am really sorry for not welcoming you properly.”

Zhang Cai quickly said, “It is not a problem, little brother is working on something important so it is alright for us to wait in the room for you. Furthermore, Liu Kai was around to play host. Has little brother completed his painting?”

Teacher Liu glanced at butcher Liu and said, “Almost done, I was broken from my concentration by this buffoon’s loud voice so I will continue working on it in the afternoon.”

Butcher Liu said innocently, “I did not know that you were painting.

Furthermore, this buffoon was born with a loud voice, and if you were not interrupted, old brother Zhang would still be sitting here waiting for you.”

Teacher Liu replied, “You always have your reasons, I won’t bother to argue with you.”

Then, he turned to Zhang Cai and said, “I have this little problem of ignoring my surroundings when I am writing or painting, and it could never go away. Here, have some tea.”

After finishing his sentence, he also poured a cup for himself and said regretfully, “This tea is not as good as the one in old brother Zhang’s house, I really missed the tea I had at that time.”

Zhang Cai smiled as he replied, “Then little brother Liu should come over to Guo village more often, or consider moving over so that you can drink it every day.”

Teacher Liu replied smilingly, “There are many things that are easier said than done.”

The men sat around and chatted for a while, before teacher Liu asked, “Old brother Zhang, what is the reason for your visit?”

Zhang Cai replied, “Little brother Liu, I came over indeed because of something important.”

Teacher Liu nodded and said, “Then old brother should go ahead and let us hear it.”

Zhang Cai continued, “Qingqing has been staying in our house for a while now, and our entire household loves her. Furthermore, my eldest son Zhang Xiaolong and she have some mutual attraction, so the reason why I came today was to ask for your permission to allow her to marry into my family.”

After he finished his speech, Zhang Cai’s eyes were glued on teacher Liu to observe his reactions.

Unfortunately, the expression that he was looking forward to did not appear. Instead, teacher Liu was evidently surprised, then worried, as though he had every intention to reject the proposal. Butcher Liu who was sitting beside

remained uncharacteristically quiet as his gaze switched between teacher Liu and Zhang Cai. After some silence, teacher Liu first spoke up and said, “Old brother Zhang, you are a straightforward person so I would like to share my thoughts directly with you, I hope you won’t be offended.”

Zhang Cai naturally agreed.

Teacher Liu continued, “Before Qingqing’s mother passed away, her only wish was for me to find a good family for her. Over these days, there are many families who came to propose, but I have rejected them all firstly because Qingqing was unsatisfied, and secondly because I did not believe that they would be able to bring her happiness. Furthermore, I know that Qingqing had loved books since she was young, and her dream was to find a husband with deep knowledge. Even though Xiaolong is a good man with an upright personality, I doubt he can recognize the characters and match Qingqing’s interests. Furthermore, Qingqing has never experienced farm life, so I am afraid she will not be able to adapt to the life Xiaolong can give her. Even though Qingqing may have some good feelings towards Xiaolong, that is only natural since he is her benefactor. But if we were to speak of marriage, then it might be taking this matter too lightly.”

Hearing the words that teacher Liu said, Zhang Cai’s face seemed to have gone numb. From their past exchanges, he had always thought that the man would be easy to talk to, and even had a good impression towards Xiaolong. But now, he realized that the admiration towards Xiaolong was in the capacity of a learned man towards a farmer, and not of a father-in-law. Furthermore, Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing were from two different worlds, even though they lived in villages, one was a learned person and the other was a farmer, there was indeed no common ground for interests, which would create some obstacles for their future life. Thus, all the points that teacher Liu raised were valid points.

Zhang Xiaohua was equally flabbergasted when he heard the always agreeable teacher Liu’s rejection. However, he was at a loss for words, so he could only look at his father while hoping that the latter could convince the other party.

Zhang Cai said, “Teacher Liu has over-considered. The matter of marriage would depend on the feelings between the interested parties. Since Xiaolong and Qingqing have agreed, then they would definitely be happy later on. Since little

brother mentioned that they have no common topics for discussion, then Qingqing could teach Xiaolong to read and the problem would be solved. As for farm work, we have four healthy pair of hands so Qingqing would never be forced to work in in the fields.”

Teacher Liu sighed again and said, “Didn’t I mention that there are things easier said than done? Furthermore, Liu Kai is still unmarried so as his younger sister, it is not very appropriate for Qingqing to marry before him.”

Zhang Cai has forgotten about this point, indeed it was customary for the elder siblings to marry before the younger ones. Since the elder brother was still not engaged, it would be inappropriate for the younger sister to consider marriage. Zhang Cai was at a loss for words.

At this moment, Liu Kai returned. Not noticing the awkward atmosphere, he said, “Father, second uncle, the food has been prepared over there. Shall uncle Zhang Cai and Xiaohua go over for a meal now?”

Teacher Liu looked at Zhang Cai and smiled, he said, “Old brother Zhang, let’s go and discuss this later. You and I can think about it later but we should have our meal first.”

Butcher Liu also took Zhang Xiaohua’s hands and said, “Come, let’s not talk about this. Food is most important, doesn’t Xiaohua love to eat roast meat the most?”

The wine and food was naturally more sumptuous than the one prepared by the Zhang household, but Zhang Cai did not have much appetite. However, faced with butcher Liu’s hospitality, Zhang Xiaohua did not stand on the ceremony and ate the most. Firstly, his was still in his growing phase, and secondly, he thought that his eldest brother and elder sister Qingqing were a good match, and that they would have a happy life ahead. Thus, he did not take teacher Liu’s objection too seriously. Seeing the boy’s healthy appetite, butcher Liu, his wife and Liu Yueyue all laughed heartily as they place more delicious food into his bowl while encouraging him to eat more.

Even though Zhang Cai did not have much appetite, his mood improved slightly when he saw his son eating happily, while engaging with casual talk with teacher Liu occasionally and exchanging toasts with butcher Liu. Liu Kai had asked his

father privately and learnt of the reason for Zhang Cai's unhappiness, and thus did not speak much and ate his food quietly.

The meal soon finished, and everyone was resting in butcher Liu's house. Zhang Cai was about to bring Zhang Xiaohua to leave and teacher Liu wanted them to stay but seeing that the day was quite late and they had a long journey ahead, he did not insist and he sent the two out to the village entrance before returning.

By this time, butcher Liu's family was also aware of the motive for Zhang Cai's trip, and Liu Yueyue said to teacher Liu, "Uncle, Uncle Zhang was right that elder sister indeed has feelings for Zhang Xiaolong. She also raised this up to me the last time we went to visit her."

Teacher Liu sighed again as he said, "All women will have to leave their household eventually when they grow older, but it will take more than just feelings for her to live in that kind of environment in the future."

Chapter 44: Suspicion

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Suspicion

On the way back home from Bali Gou, Zhang Cai kept recalling the words of teacher Liu. “The reason I let Qingqing take care of Xiaolong was to repay his act of sacrifice, but I would never expect that it would come to this. Now that Xiaolong is almost fully recovered, I am planning to bring Qingqing back in a few days’ time. Otherwise, it will be inappropriate for Qingqing to stay there any longer.”

How could Zhang Cai have replied? There was already quite some difference between their families’ backgrounds; Xiaolong was a farm boy who could not match up to a learned lady like Liu Qing. In the eyes of Zhang’s household, Liu Qing was like a phoenix, but there was no parasol tree in Zhang household, so why would the golden phoenix roost in their place? Even though Liu Qing had some attraction towards Zhang Xiaolong, and was willing to live together in the Zhang household, who knows if her mindset would change after they started living together for real? Rather than to have a disharmonious future, it would be better to abandon their hopes of such a good daughter-in-law, no matter how hard it was to accept the fact now.

Zhang Cai was thinking these thoughts as he sighed, and his worried expression did not soften throughout the whole trip back to Guo village.

Zhang Xiaolong was full of anticipation as he waited at home, and was looking forward to the good news when he saw Zhang Cai’s downcast expression as the latter entered the door. Knowing that the proposal did not go well, he quickly poured a cup of water while Zhang Cai plopped his butt onto the chair and rested. After drinking some water, Zhang Cai repeated the words that teacher Liu said to him, and everyone listened silently. Finally, Guo Sufei asked Zhang Cai,

“Should we inform our mother about this?”

Zhang Cai deliberated, and said, “Not for now. Mother knows that we went to propose during the day, and would have told her immediately if we bore good news. Since we did not inform her, she would have guess the result. Oh right, where is Liu Qing?”

Guo Sufei pointed to the room and said, “When she saw the both of you returned, she went in and hide out of embarrassment. I will tell her to come out and let her know of her father’s choice, so that she can pack her things in advance.”

Zhang Xiaolong quipped from the side, “Mother, I will inform her instead. I guess that Qingqing would be unwilling to go back, so there is no need to pack yet.”

Guo Sufei looked at her son who was still drown in love, and said, “Alright, you go ahead. Perhaps Qingqing could persuade her father otherwise.”

Not long after, Liu Qing followed behind Zhang Xiaolong as she left the room while her face was slightly pale. She did not say anything as she saw everyone, and quietly sat on a chair at the corner. Everyone else also sat down and looked quietly at her. Actually, Liu Qing’s mind was in turmoil; her father had always paid attention about her wants and would seldom reject her requests, especially when it came to her marriage. Whenever a family would come to propose, her father would not express his opinion and act based on her decision. Perhaps her father did not believe Zhang Cai’s words, or he really wanted her to marry after her elder brother? Thinking of the latter case, she became worried because her elder brother had high expectations and the women in the villages nearby could not meet them, so by the time her brother gets married she would have become an old maid.

When she raised her head, her gaze intersected with everyone else, and she forced a smile, “In the next few days when my father comes to pick me up, I will ask him about his thoughts.”

Then, she nodded towards Zhang Xiaolong who broke into a gentle smile.

That evening, dinner was not a relaxed one as everyone hurriedly took a few bites and cleaned up soon after. When Guo Sufei went to deliver the

grandmother her food, the grandmother asked about the news they Zhang Cai returned with. Guo Sufei hesitated, and before she could speak, the grandmother interrupted, "It is alright, Sufei, I know very well the situation of our family. Our few children may be outstanding, but with their family backgrounds like this, being ditched would be a natural affair. Just leave it up to their fates. Sooner or later, they will all get married eventually."

When Guo Sufei heard her mother's words, her thoughts were mixed. She was happy that her mother could see things clearer than her, but was upset that she could not fulfill her mother's last wish.

Everyone was not in the mood to work after their dinner, so they chatted idly before going to bed. Only Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei were along in the main room discussing in low voices for a long period before they eventually turned in to bed as well.

No oil lamp was lit in the house, so Guo Sufei walked to her bed in the darkness, and was lying on it while thinking of the discussion she had with Zhang Cai earlier when she heard Liu Qing tossed around, so she asked the latter, "Are you still thinking of your father's words?"

"Yes, auntie." Liu Qing replied.

Guo Sufei said, "Qingqing, your father was doing what he thought was best for you. You are still young after all, and have not gone through enough experiences. Your father would have his own ideas, and would hope that you lead a comfortable life in the future. We all understand his intentions, and we also feel that we are unable to provide you with enough. When your father was young, your mother passed away because your family's situation was not well off, and it became a lifelong regret for him. Thus, I think he wants you to find a learned man who can exchange conversations with you, just like your elder brother, because that should be the life that you deserve. Even though I feel that my son Xiaolong is pretty good, our family situation is indeed not as well off and thus cannot send him to school. This is also part of life, after all, who would not want the best for their children?"

"I understand, auntie. I have an inkling of my father's thoughts. While I still think that living a comfortable life with a learned man would make me happy, I

also think that a simple life on the farm can bring happiness. Even though the times may get tough, but I can make a difference with it using own two hands. Furthermore, I am not like my mother whose body was weak, I was born in the village and even if I have no experience working on a farm, I believe I am able to adapt as well as any other villager.” Liu Qing said indignantly.

Guo Sufei smiled and said, “Qingqing, I can see that you are a person who is unwilling to bend. Actually, a marriage is not just the matters of two people, you will have to enter a new household and adapt to their ways while giving up on your own. Furthermore, every household has its own problems, and any of these problems may spoil the dream life that you are thinking of now.”

Liu Qing said, “I already know these things, auntie. When I was at home, neither my father nor brother knew any housework so I had to do these things by myself. I believe that I have sufficient preparation for whatever ahead. Furthermore... furthermore, during my stay here, I felt that the household atmosphere was very homely which is not the case at my own home, so I think that I can adapt easily into this household.”

Her words became softer as she spoke, as though she was embarrassed.

“In addition, the most important thing is Xiaolong. I feel that he is good in many ways, and I do not wish his family’s background to become an impediment to my happiness. Actually, I have already thought of it before, while I do not have many things to talk about with Xiaolong, I can teach him to read, and he has also agreed to it, so I believe that our lives in the future will still be happy.” As she finished her last sentence, Liu Qing’s voice was almost inaudible. Fortunately, it was pitch black and her embarrassment was hidden by the darkness, or she would not have the courage to say these words out.

Guo Sufei felt relieved as she heard these words, she also comforted Liu Qing, “Qingqing, auntie is very happy that you have shared these words with her. As you can see, our family is very happy when you are around, not just Xiaolong alone. You uncle and I have also treated you as our daughter-in-law, and Xiaohua and Xiaohu can’t wait to call you their sister-in-law. We will try our best to get you married into our house. Do you still remember the time at Lu town when the bullies gave us their checks as compensation?”

Liu Qing replied, "Oh, I would have forgotten if you did not raise this up. It was indeed a large sum of money."

Guo Sufei continued, "I had just discussed with your uncle, if your father is obstructing us because of our financial situation, then we plan to use these checks to give your father a sense of security."

Liu Qing immediately objected, as she said, "Auntie, we must never use that money. If the bullies in Lu town found out that the checks have been used, then won't we be stepping into their trap? If we are not a hundred percent sure, we should never touch that money, or we will lose the normal lives we have now. Furthermore, my father is not someone who is money-minded, I believe that he has some other ideas, and I will wait for him to share them with me first."

Guo Sufei also agreed, "That is right, I have also said that to your uncle, but he was as stubborn as a bull. I guess that he is afraid that your father will take you away. Anyway, once your father arrives, ask him about his thoughts. Anyway, I think that if Xiaolong is unable to marry you, then perhaps no other lady will catch his eyes and he would stay unmarried his whole life?"

Liu Qing smiled as she replied, "Look at you, auntie. How am I that good? Meeting Xiaolong was part of our fates anyway."

Guo Sufei said, "Yes, fate. While fate can bring two people together, it is unable to get them to marry and form a family with each other. Whatever, it is late so we should sleep and replenish our energy to take care of this family tomorrow."

Liu Qing said, "Yes, auntie. You should sleep early too."

After sharing the thoughts in her heart, Liu Qing felt her burden lightened and slept soon after. Hearing Liu Qing's thoughts, Guo Sufei was also extremely happy. Even if this girl was unable to become her daughter-in-law, she would still wish for her to find happiness elsewhere. As she thought to herself, she slowly fell asleep as well.

Except that in the opposite room, Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaolong were unable to sleep, and were unsure of when they ever could.

Chapter 45: Initiative

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Initiative

On that morning, the sun rose as usual.

The Zhang household was busy preparing for the spring farming season, but Zhang Xiaolong was obviously in daze. Once in a while, he would turn to look at Liu Qing while the latter would appear as if nothing was out of the norm. Her expressions made Zhang Xiaolong even more anxious, and when he finally found an opportunity to stand beside her, he whispered, "Have you made your decision?"

Liu Qing teased as she avoided his question, "What decision?"

Zhang Xiaolong was slightly displeased as he said, "About what to do when your father comes to pick you up. Have you decided to go home?"

Liu Qing replied, "Yes, when my father comes to pick me up, I would naturally follow him home."

Zhang Xiaolong's face turned pale as he said, "I knew it, the words you said to me previously were all to comfort me so that I could recover sooner. Now that I am fully recovered, you are dropping the act and returning to the comfortable lifestyle that you have grown used to, because there is nothing here worthy of your attention."

Seeing that Zhang Xiaolong had taken her words for real, Liu Qing quickly withdrew her joke and said, "Xiaolong, look at what you just said. Do you really believe that I have putting on an act in front of you? Do you not know about my feelings?"

Zhang Xiaolong was flustered as he replied, "It is not that I do not trust your

words, but because I do not understand how you are able to stay calm at a situation like this while I am nervous to the point of a breakdown.”

Liu Qing smiled as she said, “You silly fool, on usual days you appear to be smart but today, your senses have all left you. Isn’t there a phrase “Mud blocks when the water comes, the general stops them when his soldiers go” ? Even though my father will be coming to pick me up, whether or not I go back with him depends on my own decision. My father would usually let me make my own decisions, but he made an exception this time so I want to hear him out first to make clear of the situation. There will naturally be a solution, so why should I worry now?”

Zhang Xiaolong smiled and said, “I am not like you, whose heart is as sturdy as the bamboos. I would naturally be frantic, and I feel that we should take the initiative to find your father to discuss this matter rather than to wait for him to come one of these days.”

Liu Qing was impressed and she praised Zhang Xiaolong, “You are right, we should take the initiative and grab the opportunity with our own hands. If we wait for my father to come, we would be falling off the boat and should there be any undercurrents, then, ah, why don’t I go home first to see the situation first?”

Zhang Xiaolong felt uneasy as he replied, “It was only a random thought, I did not think of as far ahead as you. In addition, I should accompany you if you go since my injuries have mostly recovered and a half day journey should not pose as any problem.”

Liu Qing pondered for a while and said, “Your idea is great. Let’s find my father together and see what is really in that gourd-head of his.”

Zhang Xiaolong was naturally worried and he asked, “Qingqing, what if your father refuses to change his mind and forbade you from coming here anymore?”

Liu Qing said slyly, “That is impossible, I have my ways to deal with my father. He will definitely agree to it.”

Zhang Xiaolong was still nervous and he persisted, “I am asking what if, what could we do if the situation comes to that?”

Liu Qing replied confidently, “Elder brother Xiaolong, I am aware of what you

are worrying about, and there are many things we have not made clear to each other yet. However, you must believe me that I... I will accompany you.”

After finishing her sentence, her face turned red and she could not bear to lift her head anymore.

Zhang Xiaolong drummed up some courage and pulled her towards him, and said in a low voice, “Qingqing, you are the best.”

Liu Qing did not let him have his way. She stepped back and said, “You should think about what to say in Bali Gou.” Then, she ran off.

Zhang Xiaolong watched her from the back as Liu Qing ran off as he tried not to forget the previous sensation.

When Zhang Xiaolong’s focus finally returned to the people around him, he turned to Zhang Cai and asked, “Father, did Liu Qing’s father mention when he will be fetching her?”

Zhang Cai looked at Zhang Xiaolong and replied, “Yes, he mentioned that he would come in these few days, but did not give a specific date.”

Zhang Xiaolong explained, “It is like this father, I plan to follow Liu Qing back to Bali Gou to have a straight discussion with Liu Qing’s father.”

Zhang Cai was surprised and he wrinkled his brow, saying, “Is this Liu Qing’s or your idea?”

Zhang Xiaolong replied, “It is my idea, and I have discussed it with Liu Qing who had agreed earlier.”

The wrinkle on Zhang Cai’s brow left and he smiled, “You are quite something huh, when I was your age, I did not have half your guts. No bad, haha.”

While he laughed, Guo Sufei walked over and asked, “The children’s father, what is so funny?”

Zhang Cai replied, “Our son has finally did something good. He has planned to look for his own father-in-law.”

Guo Sufei was confused so Zhang Cai repeated the words Zhang Xiaolong said to him. Guo Sufei was happy and she said, “This is a pretty good idea, when do you and Qingqing plan to set off?”

Zhang Xiaolong replied, “Mother, didn’t teacher Liu say that he would be coming shortly? I plan to find him before he comes, so I can’t wait to leave now.”

Guo Sufei looked at the sky and said, “If you leave now, you will not be able to return by tonight. Why not have your lunch first. I will prepare the food with Liu Qing right now, sigh, without Liu Qing’s help in the future, I won’t be able to cook again. Xiaolong, you have to succeed in getting Liu Qing to stay.”

Zhang Xiaolong smiled and replied, “Okay, mother, I definitely will.”

Lunch was prepared and eaten in a hurry. Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing prepared themselves and just as they were about to set off, Zhang Xiaohu said, “Eldest brother, it may not be safe with just the two of you. How about if I come along?”

Zhang Cai also added along, “Xiaolong, you should bring something with you and not go over empty handed.”

Zhang Xiaolong replied, “I understand father, I will buy something when I go to the village.”

Liu Qing heard that Zhang Xiaohu wanted to tag along, and her eyes brightened as she said to Zhang Xiaolong, “Let Xiaohu follow us, it will be safer on the road with three people. You also do not need to buy anything, just bring the spring water from the well would be good enough.”

Zhang Xiaolong smacked his forehead and said, “Look at me, I have forgotten that you father loves this water the most.”

Zhang Xiaohua jumped off from his chair and said, “Then I will go right now to draw some fresh ones. You just get ready to carry them over.”

When Xiaohua came back with the water, Zhang Xiaolong also borrowed a bottle which could be sealed from the neighbor, and filled it to the brim with the spring water which naturally would be Zhang Xiaohu’s luggage during the trip.

Thus, the three people set off.

There were two routes from Guo village to Bali Gou, one was along the river which could lead them through a bamboo forest followed by some hills. The other was from the small bridge ahead which would lead to a main road that

would let them pass by another village on the way. The smaller road was more difficult to walk but faster, whereas the main road was twice to thrice the distance.

Zhang Xiaolong and the rest naturally chose the small road.

It was already spring, so the river has begun to melt and was already flowing. The gurgling of the river and chirping of the birds made a melodious sound and their trip less tiring. Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing were holding hands as they walked in the front, as though they were enjoying their own private moment now that the family was not around. Zhang Xiaohu was at a distance behind them holding on to the bottle of water in his hands as he smiled at the scene of his eldest brother and sister-in-law-to-be, while hoping in his heart to have a beautiful encounter in Bali Gou.

Zhang Xiaolong's heart was painted by the sweetness of love, he wished that the journey would never end so he can enjoy this happiness forever. He had never enjoyed travelling as much as that day, and never realized how beautiful the mountain scenery was, and never noticed how melodious the sounds of the river and birds could be. He had also never thought that the distance between Guo village and Bali Gou could be too short, and when Liu Qing let go of his hands, he was still in a trance as he asked why before Liu Qing answered timidly that they were already reaching their destination. Only then did he come to a realization that the dreamlike memory has come to its end.

Liu Qing led Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu into the village, and ever so often, a villager who knew her would wave and stare shamelessly at the two men. This made Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu feel awkward, and even Liu Qing was at a loss on how to react. Even though these people did not ask her about the men, she would not be able to explain if they did. Yet if she did not explain herself, these people might let their imaginations run wild. As there was still quite some distance to her home, she guessed that her arrival would become a hot topic that would spread across the whole village.

Just as Liu Qing brought Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu into the house, teacher Liu and butcher Liu were coincidentally chatting while sitting in the courtyard. When Liu Qing entered the door, she saw teacher Liu sitting on a stool while holding a tea cup, and butcher Liu opposite him with a wine gourd in

his hands.

Seeing her father, Liu Qing's eyes turned red and shouted "Father....." before running over to him.

Teacher Liu was surprised to see the Liu Qing whom he missed came back. He happily put down his tea and stood up to welcome her home. Even though he had met her recently when he went over, it was not the same as seeing her in his own house. Liu Qing jumped into his embrace like a child, while Teacher Liu stroke her head lovingly and said, "It is good to see you back, it is good to see you back."

Chapter 46: Persuade

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Persuade

Zhang Xiaohu stood by Zhang Xiaolong while still holding on to the bottle of water, however, his eyes ran over the courtyard as though he was looking for someone.

Teacher Liu stroke his daughter's hair tenderly, and his gaze went over his daughter's head towards Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu, and nodded smilingly to them. Then, he used a hand and waved to them with an apologetic expression on his face. Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu naturally nodded in understanding as they waited patiently outside.

Butcher Liu saw that Liu Qing has returned and teacher Liu walking up to welcome her, so he remained seated as he continued to drink his wine. After he finished the wine, he saw the two brothers standing at the door, and thus he stood up and said smilingly, "I was wondering who brought Qingqing back when I saw these two little heroes here. Quick, come in and drink some wine with uncle."

Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu smiled as they walked towards the square table in the courtyard.

On hearing the two words "drink wine", Liu Qing who was still in the embrace of her father turned her head and said to butcher Liu, "Second uncle, Xiaolong's injuries have not fully recovered, so he cannot drink for now. If you want to drink, look for Xiaohu."

Butcher said loudly, "You little rascal, now you are standing on the side of the outsiders."

Liu Qing replied sweetly, "Second uncle....."

Butcher Liu said, "Alright, stop calling me, I know what to do. You don't even call me like this on normal days."

Teacher Liu observed the farm boy who was walking towards him. Even though he was still not handsome, his youthful face was full of vigor and not like the other farmers, and he did not have the carefulness of Zhang Cai found on his body. Instead, his eyes were bright, and even though his clothes were old and tattered, they were washed clean and fitted him well. His steps were steady which gave off an overall sense of steadfastness. Teacher Liu naturally knew the reason why Liu Qing brought Zhang Xiaolong home, and although he was still against the marriage, he indeed had admiration for the boy.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu walked to teacher Liu's side and bowed respectfully. Teacher Liu did not bother to be too formal, and he simply said, "You have travelled far, and now that the sky is getting dark, there is no way you can return Guo village by today so you can stay in my house for tonight. Both of you can go over to my second brother's side first while Qingqing and I finish our conversation."

The two brothers agreed and walked to over to under the roof, and they took a stool each to sit on while they chatted idly with butcher Liu. Teacher Liu said to Liu Qing, "Qingqing, let's go to the study room to talk."

Liu Qing released herself from the embrace of her father and said, "Father, you go in first, I will pour some tea for you. Xiaolong and I have brought water from the Guo village, don't you want to drink it again?"

Teacher Liu was speechless; he shook his head helplessly and smiled as he walked into the study room.

Liu Qing walked to under the roof and took the bottle of spring water from Zhang Xiaohu, and she glanced towards Zhang Xiaolong, "Both of you accompany my second uncle for the time being, I will go to the kitchen to boil the water and bring some snacks for you. I am sure you must be feeling hungry after walking the whole afternoon."

Then, Liu Qing went to the kitchen and placed the spring water on the stove to boil. Seeing that the kitchen was empty, she made some simple dishes and took them out with some leftover biscuits to let the two brothers satisfy their hunger.

Butcher Liu happily helped himself to the food and drank his wine while pouring a cup of Xiaohu and really not forcing Xiaolong to drink.

Not long after, the water began to boil. Liu Qing meticulously made some tea and carried the teapot set into the study room. Before entering the study room, she exchanged glances with Zhang Xiaolong and nodded meaningfully with her eyes full of certainty.

Teacher Liu was reading a book listlessly when he saw Liu Qing entered. He immediately put his book down, rubbed his nose and said, "This water from Guo village is indeed different from elsewhere; the tea it makes is so aromatic."

Liu Qing placed the teacup in front of her father and watched the latter as he drank the tea sip by sip, closing his eyes while remaining silent.

After teacher Liu has drunk some of the tea, she asked, "Father, how is the tea?"

Teacher Liu replied, "Ai, this tea is naturally much better than the ones we drink every day, but it was not as delicious as the one I had in Guo village, probably because it is no longer as fresh after being still for quite some time."

Then, Liu Qing remained silent and continued to watch as teacher Liu appreciated the tea.

The two sat for a while quietly, before teacher Liu smiled and spoke up first, "Qingqing, is there something you want to say to father, which is why you came over so suddenly?"

Liu Qing's face turned red as she replied, "Father knows the obvious yet he still asks. If I did not come back today, would father have gone over to fetch me in a couple of days?"

Teacher Liu sighed and put his cup down. He then said, "Qingqing, I have always let you make your own decisions since young, and have not forced you to do anything you dislike. This time, father did not follow your wishes, so you should understand my dilemma."

Liu Qing pondered and said, "I am guessing that father is afraid that I would suffer in the Zhang household, and that I would end up doing farm work, while Zhang Xiaolong will turn out to be a boorish farm man, and I would not be happy

after marrying him?”

Teacher Liu nodded his head and said, “Spending your days as a couple is not just a single person’s problem; it requires two people to match. If one person enjoys reading books, and another wants to work in a farm, then their interests would lead them in different direction and their life would be flavorless. Furthermore, the Zhang household is poor, and you should have already experienced it yourself and know that life there is not as comfortable as in Bali Gou.”

Liu Qing nodded her head and replied, “Father, what you have said was right, but I have already considered these points and have even shared them with Zhang Xiaolong’s mother. Like you, she advised me to think twice.”

Teacher Liu asked curiously, “She really said that?”

Liu Qing replied, “Of course, I too had not expected auntie, who was a simple uneducated housewife, to be so sharp and understanding.”

Teacher Liu said, “In that case, it is no wonder they could raise such good children.”

Then, teacher Liu continued to say, “Actually, these are things you are unable to understand without experiencing it yourself. Older people like us can only share our advice even though I know you will not listen given your personality. Only after you hit a block by yourself will you be able to understand my difficulties. Even though what happened to you mother happened a long time ago, it will always haunt me forever. If I had the ability, I could have prevented you mother from suffering and leaving us prematurely. Thus, I do not hope that you will suffer the same fate as your mother.”

Liu Qing’s thoughts were steady like bamboo, and she said, “Father, I think you are wrong about this. If you had the ability then, could you become the current person you are today? Was mother happy when she was with you? If life is filled with unhappiness, then what is the use of a long life anyway? Mother loved and respected you, and although she followed you for only ten years, that short period of time gave her more happiness than what other people can enjoy their whole lives. You say, what do you think her choice would be?”

Liu Qing continued to argue, “Father, I am actually a person who believes that

fate is predetermined. Be it sorrow or joy, they are all part of the experiences of living. Life is like a trajectory, many trajectories would intersect with each other to form a complete life. Mother's trajectory was aligned to yours, and your trajectory was predetermined to be with her. Even though you feel that you had not taken good care of her, but since the day she followed you, the trajectories of our families have already been determined, and mother's happiness and demise was also set in stone. To try and change otherwise would only be useless effort. If father had joined officialdom, you would naturally neglect mother, and even though she would not have to leave us so early, would she have been happy?"

Seeing teacher Liu who was deep in his thoughts, Liu Qing pressed on, "Actually, I have always been considering the fate between Zhang Xiaolong and I. I have told Yueyue this before, since the moment I saw Zhang Xiaolong in the cloth shop, I felt that our trajectories have tied to each other. The things that happened later should be no foreign to father. I can only use these two words 'fate' to describe the things between us. Furthermore, there is something important which father may have not known."

Teacher Liu was surprised and he asked, "What is it?"

Liu Qing said mysteriously, "Doesn't father find the water in the Guo village to be especially delicious?"

Teacher Liu replied, "Yes, but so what?"

Liu Qing then recounted the illness that the grandmother suffered and the doctor's diagnosis, as well as the matter of the water. Teacher Liu was obviously shocked and he asked, "Are you sure about the effect of this spring water?"

Liu Qing replied, "That is for certain, you can see this just by looking at Zhang Xiaolong's arm. Have you seen someone heal from a fracture after just one month? In addition, when Yueyue visited me the last time, she said that my skin was evidently better than before, and I can feel the changes on myself as well."

Teacher Liu wrinkled his brow and did not ask any further, while Liu Qing continued to say, "Father, think about it. The water from the well is an invaluable treasure, your body has been weak all these time and it has never gotten better since mother left. To see your body recover is one of my few

wishes, and if this spring water, even living up to a hundred years would not be a pipedream. This well was dug up by the Zhang household and is therefore their property, don't you think that this is the heavens giving Xiaolong and me another chance?"

"Furthermore, elder brother has not married and we do not know when he will ever do so. If I marry into the Zhang household, you can also move in with us. Then, I can take care of father, while father can enjoy the treasure that has been bequeathed by the heavens, wouldn't that be the perfect outcome? And won't all the problems in my heart be settled?"

Chapter 47: Approval

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Approval

Teacher Liu said, “Qingqing, whether or not father drinks this well water and gets better or live up to a hundred years of age is not something you should consider. What father cares about the most is whether or not you can lead a stable and happy life.”

Liu Qing replied, “Father, then what if I am able to both lead a happy life and take good care of you so that you can stay healthy? Why would I not want to do so? Furthermore, marriage has always been a gamble, you may be able to judge a person’s personality in one look, or you can never figure it out for a whole life. Thus, you can only judge based on what you know, and if you win the gamble, then happiness will belong to you. The so called perfect match is only a name that people give to those successful marriages, there are so many ‘perfect matches’ in the world that ended up with an unhappy marriage. Liang Sanbo and Zu Yingtai’s beautiful romance is just a story, perhaps in the real world, they would not be as loving as you and mother. Zhang Xiaolong may not be as dashing or suave as Liang Sanbo, but he definitely win in the area of steadfastness and kindness. To those scholars in the past, I could only see their personality on the surface, but for Xiaolong, I could see in an eye the essence of his nature, which is willing to continue the fate between the two of us.”

Teacher Liu was surprised when he heard her speech, and said, “Qingqing, I have taught you to read since you were young and now I am not sure if it was the wise thing to do. Having read so many books, I don’t even have the ability to compete in words with you anymore.”

Liu Qing smiled as she said, “Father, what I know is but a small part of what is out there. Compared to father’s broad knowledge, the difference is too vast.”

Teacher Liu smiled and did not say anymore. Instead, Liu Qing continued, “Actually, the Zhang household has another strength which had made me moved. I am referring to the harmony within the family and how they treat the elderly. Marriage is not just about the two people, but about the interactions with the rest of Xiaolong’s household. During my short stay, I had received much care and concern from the two adults and even the grandmother; I felt that they had a sensible perspective of the world, and are considerate of other people. Only in this environment would allow the later generations to live a good, happy life. Thus, I believe that I can find happiness not less than that in Bali Gou, and sometimes even more.”

Up to this point, teacher Liu could not help but let out another smile, as he scolded, “You little rascal, already badmouthing about Bali Gou before you leave. No wonder other people compare their daughters to gra water.”

Liu Qing said sweetly, “Father, that is not what I meant. I only said that there are things in the Zhang’s household that cannot be found in Bali Gou, perhaps because there is no mother here.”

Teacher Liu turned solemn and said, “Indeed, Qingqing. It has been hard on you to not have a mother’s love when growing up, while your second aunt is so brusque that she is not even concerned for her own Yueyue, not to mention you. These are all part of your father’s mistakes.”

Liu Qing comforted teacher Liu, “Father, don’t be upset. I have already grown so much, and will perhaps receive love in the future. You keep calling second aunt a brusque uneducated woman, but isn’t Xiaolong’s mother an uneducated woman as well? However, she is meticulous and gentle, and so different from second aunt. Of course, I am not saying that second aunt is bad, after all, second uncle’s household is run by her and they are so much livelier than us. Perhaps, I am compatible with Xiaolong’s mother, which is why I feel a sense of motherly love from her.”

Teacher Liu nodded his head and said, “You have always been strong headed, seldom would anyone be able to take you under his wing. It seems like this is another reason for choosing Zhang Xiaolong.”

Liu Qing flushed as she nodded her head.

Teacher Liu sighed and said, “When this Zhang Xiaolong met you and save you, I guess that it can be counted as fate. When the Zhang household dug up well which contained the miracle water, it can be counted as a benefit. The Zhang household has fate with you, and their people are all easy to get along, all these have been said by you, how else can I argue?”

Liu Qing was jubilant as she asked, “In that case, father, are you agreeing?”

Teacher smiled as he said, “You have stayed in this Zhang household for more than a month, people who knew the reason said that you are honorable and was determined to return the favor, and I did not pay attention to the trash talk of those who spouted rubbish. Anyway, to have such an outcome could be said to be the perfect ending of a fairy tale story. Furthermore, with your personality, wouldn’t you start to emulate Cui Yingying if I had continued to disapprove?”

Li Qing replied sweetly, “Father is not as paranoid as that Cui household mistress.”

Teacher Liu said, “Don’t get smart with your words. Seeing you come back, I already expected you to be fully prepared to convince me. If not, knowing your personality, you would still be hiding in the Zhang household away from me.”

The father-daughter couple continued their banter for a while, and teacher Liu said, “It is already getting late, quickly go and prepare some dinner and invite your second aunt and Yueyue over to help out. We can all gather and celebrate together tonight. Oh right, you can hurry over to Xiaolong to let him know, or he will continue to be jittery all night.”

Upon hearing his reply, Liu Qing said happily, “Then father should go out with me, so that you can talk and learn more about each other.”

Then, Liu Qing supported her father as they went out of the study room together.

The sky outside has already turned dark, and the oil lamp was already lit and placed under the roof. Butcher Liu and the two men were still chatting while seated, and there was a new addition beside them, who was none other than Liu Kai. Zhang Xiaolong’s gaze has swept passed the study room door several times, and had not paid much attention to the topic as he was too preoccupied in his own thoughts. At that moment, Liu Qing came out of the room with her father,

and he was naturally the first person to notice them, and he stood up immediately without realizing. Seeing that Zhang Xiaolong has stood up, Liu Qing flashed him a smile and nodded her head slightly, which Zhang Xiaolong caught and his heart bloomed into happiness. At this moment, Liu Kai noticed the commotion behind him; he turned his head and saw his sister whom he has not met in a while, and was so happy that he ran over to sound out her wellbeing, “Qingqing, it has been such a while, why do I feel as though you have changed into a completely different person? Not only have your skin become whiter, even your eyes are brighter, and your demeanor has become more elegant. How does this look as if you have been attending to an injured person?”

Hearing his sentence, Liu Qing looked at teacher Liu happily while teacher Liu nodded his head knowingly. Liu Qing replied, “Where so, elder brother, it just has been a long while since we met. In the next few days, you feel that your younger sister has not changed at all from the past.”

Liu Kai said, “Reasonable, this is probably the case of ‘not meeting for three days, and the lens turns rosier’.”

Liu Qing skipped the topic and asked, “Elder brother, what should we eat for dinner?”

Liu Kai jumped and said, “I have cleanly forgotten about this while talking to second uncle and Zhang Xiaohu. I will go over to second aunt’s house to inform them right now.”

Liu Qing pulled his arm and said, “Father said we can all eat at our house, as treat it as a reunion meal. I will buy some things from the village, you can go over to second aunt’s house and ask them to bring whatever they made over so we can share our meals together. At the same time, they can come over to help out.”

Liu Kai agreed and left quickly.

When Liu Qing was about to step out to shop, Zhang Xiaolong naturally wanted to follow but he was stopped by teacher Liu who said, “Xiaolong, don’t leave yet. Come with me to the study room for a while.”

Thus, Zhang Xiaohu followed Liu Qing to the village while butcher Liu was left along to drink his wine. As the latter looked at the busy people around him, he

gulped his wine and thought of how colorful his life was.

Zhang Xiaolong was nervous when he entered the study room; the previous look which Liu Qing gave him had already told him that their trip was successful, and it seems that this old man is about to give him the run down to state clear of his new responsibilities. Even though he was mentally prepared, he still felt jittery in his heart.

Teacher Liu entered the room and invited Zhang Xiaolong to sit without sitting down himself. Then, he wrinkled his brows and paced back and forth across the room, and after three rounds, he broke the silence and said, "Xiaolong, you probably know what my response is."

Zhang Xiaolong answered cautiously, "Yes sir."

Teacher Liu replied, "In that case, I won't talk too much. The reason why I called you in was to lay down some things to you."

Zhang Xiaolong respectfully said, "Please go ahead, I will carve them into my heart."

Teacher Liu seemed satisfied with Zhang Xiaolong's response. He smiled and said, "Qingqing has lived in Bali Gou all her life, and even though we cannot be said to be wealthy, Qingqing has never gone through any hardships so she has no experience in farming and the likes. This differs greatly from your household, so I hope you bear that in mind."

Zhang Xiaolong replied, "You can rest assured about this matter. Our household does not have much land in the first place, Xiaohua's field was even reclaimed from the hills, so there will not be much field work to do. I cannot promise that Qingqing will never work in the fields, but I will never allow her to do any of the hard labor when I am around."

Teacher Liu said, "What you said was the truth, you did not say something ridiculous like Qingqing not having to work a day in her life. Actually, Qingqing is not someone who cannot take hardships, it is just that she has no experience in the fields. When both of you live together in the future, I only ask that you take good care of her. I do not expect you to provide her with some high standard of living, but I hope that both of you will remain loving and happy. Another thing is about your education. You have not read many books, so there is quite a

difference in knowledge between the two of you. This is something you lack, and it will definitely impact your lives in the future. I do not ask that you become a bookworm, but I hope that you can learn some characters and read some good books, so that you can have a common topic with Liu Qing and can communicate better with her. One more thing, helping others in need is not wrong, but you are no longer alone in the future. On your shoulders is the burden of your family, so when you encounter any injustice, I hope that you think about your own abilities first. If not, should any misfortune occur, the whole family will be the ones to suffer.”

Then, teacher Liu spoke about a few more things, while Zhang Xiaolong nodded in agreement. Even though he disagreed with some of the opinions, he knew that teacher Liu was saying so for his sake so he could not talk back. Thus, it continued like this where one person who speak and the other would listen until the sky turned completely black, and the surroundings were harder to make out. Just as teacher Liu was about to lit the lamp, someone knocked on the door of the study room.

Chapter 48: Betrothal gift

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Betrothal gift

Teacher Liu opened the door, and it was Liu Qing who came to inform that dinner was ready.

Even though dinner that night was quite rushed, it was still sumptuous as most of it was made in Liu Yueyue's house. Liu Qing only prepared some additional dishes and embellished some of the already completed ones, which led the people who had not eaten her food for a long time to wolf down the food ravenously. The host of the dinner then came out with a long speech, and butcher Liu's family understood teacher Liu's meaning and were equally happy for Liu Qing. However, the Zhang household has not officially proposed, so his words still sounded quite premature.

Everyone was happy, only Xiaohu was stealing glances at Liu Yueyue from the corners of his eyes, but unfortunately, Liu Yueyue did not pay him any attention which led him to feel disappointed.

After the meal, they chatted for a little longer, before Liu Qing who had walked for half the morning yawned, and thus, Liu Kai arranged the two Zhang brothers a room for them to stay overnight, while butcher Liu and his family went back home to rest.

Early in the morning of the next day, the two Zhang brothers were about to set off to return to Guo village. Liu Qing decided to stay at her own house for few more days partly due to homesickness, and because she too embarrassed to be present when Zhang Xiaolong discussed the marriage arrangements with his parents. Teacher Liu reminded Zhang Xiaolong to explain to Zhang Cai the reasons for his previous rejection and to pick an auspicious date to come over to

propose.

Zhang Xiaolong agreed readily with a wide smile on his face, and thus the two men set off under the reluctant eyes of Liu Qing.

The journey to Bali Gou was sweet and full of romance, whereas the journey back was full of joy and elation.

After returning to Guo village, they could see from afar that the whole family was standing in the courtyard looking out and waiting for their arrival. The whole family, apart from Xiaohua, appeared to not have rested well last night. When he saw that Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu has returned, Zhang Xiaohua was the first to jump and run towards them, asking joyfully, "Eldest brother, how was it? Does our family have something to look forward to? Ah.....Why didn't elder sister Qingqing not return with you? Could it be..."

Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to continue his question.

Even before Zhang Xiaolong could speak up, Zhang Xiaohu said irately, "Can't you see the peach blossom on eldest brother's face, he is so happy that he can't even close his mouth. You should help me take over this bottle in my hands which I have carried for the whole journey."

Only then did Zhang Xiaohua became excited again, but he did not take the bottle from Zhang Xiaohu and instead sped back home to share the good news.

Upon receiving the good news, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei were naturally happy and they rushed to the entrance of the courtyard to welcome their son home. Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu were clustered all the way to the courtyard like heroes, and after Zhang Xiaolong sat on his chair, gulped down the water that Zhang Xiaohua served, he recounted the events in Bali Gou to the delight of Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei. When Zhang Xiaolong told them about teacher Liu's apology as well as his request for the Zhang household to pick an auspicious time, the couple's joy was mixed with worry. They were joyful because teacher Liu was as reasonable as they expected, and is a worthy friend to know. Of course, they will become relatives soon so he would become a dependable relative to rely on. However, they were worried because the betrothal gift should be extravagant, but their family was not well off, so it posed a problem to them. While they are not concerned about themselves, they were afraid that their gift

will cause teacher Liu to lose face, yet if they spend too much, they may not be able to afford the price and may even burden the future lives of Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing.

However, these matters can be left for later, because the entire household wanted to celebrate the joyous occasion and pick an auspicious date first. Guo Sufei also shared this news happily with the grandmother who was already bedridden, which made the latter so excited that even her face turned red.

Thus, the Zhang household was immersed in a joyous mood for the next few days, and when spring officially began, Zhang Xiaolong's spring also arrived at the same time. Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei were busy with the matters of the betrothal, while the three children were busy working on the fields. The days grew warmer as time passed, and the ground began to thaw, while the gentle spring wind kept blowing onto their faces as it reminding them that it was time to plant their crops soon.

The custom for proposing was actually very simple, that is the parents of the groom will prepare all sorts of gifts while preparing the eight numbers which represents the time of birth of the groom, and they will visit the bride's family who will accept the gifts and pass over the eight numbers of the bride, and by then the proposal would be considered complete. Of course, there were people who went the extra mile and record the time of the exchange, while others would have multiple visits for different stages of discussions. Even the gifts became more extravagant as it is human nature to be jealous and petty, so the gifts became a competition up to the point where some people would just give money, or even gold.

However, this custom of gifts became a source of problem for the two Zhang parents.

Zhang Cai felt that Liu Qing was a good daughter-in-law so they should present a better gift to display how much they treasure her, and to give teacher Liu some face among the village. Guo Sufei felt that their family should not spend more than they can afford, so the gifts cannot be too expensive. If not, their lives would be hard even before the bride marries into the house.

Zhang Cai was actually well aware of the reality, and he had such thoughts in

the beginning. However, he thought back to the few hundred silvers that were hidden at home; with the money, they could make this proposal a successful one without any worries. Whenever he raise this matter, Guo Sufei would become worried and mention how she previously shared this with Liu Qing and the latter insisted that they do not touch the money. Yet, since they have the money, why aren't they using it? It has already been over a month and no one had come to make any troubles for them, so it was likely that the other party had truly meant the money as compensation. If so, the money now belonged to them rightfully, so what was the problem in spending some?

Over time, the difference in opinions seemed to collapse, and both couple decided to use the checks. Thus, Guo Sufei took the checks and the plaque out from the drawer, and then called Zhang Xiaolong into the room.

Zhang Xiaolong's injuries were healing at a very fast pace so he no longer had to restrain the movements on his arm and only has to watch out for heavier things to lift. When Zhang Xiaolong entered the room, he asked, "Father, mother, what is the matter? I am about to go to the fields to loosen the soil."

Guo Sufei said tenderly, "Your arm has not fully recovered yet, so you should not overwork yourself and let Xiaohu and Xiaohua do more of the work."

Zhang Xiaolong smiled as he replied, "I have lain on the bed for a month until my bones feel rusty, so it feels even more comfortable to start working again. Furthermore, Xiaohua's body is still growing so how can we let him do more of the work?"

Zhang Cai said, "I know that you are feeling very energetic now so we will not stop you. Just remember that you have many days ahead to look forward to so you should look after you own body better."

Zhang Xiaolong replied, "I got it, father, so what is the matter? It can't be that you called me in just to rest?"

Guo Sufei said, "It is like this, your father and I are planning to go Bali Gou one of these days to propose to Qingqing, but we are unable to prepare a bride price of suitable value. Hence, we have decided to cash those checks to get enough money."

After she finished her sentence, she placed two pieces of the checks as well as

the plaque in front of Zhang Xiaolong, and pointed to the plaque saying, "You should hold on to this thing first. If something happens while you are cashing out the checks, this thing might end up useful."

Zhang Xiaolong looked at the gentle expressions on his parents' face, and then at the checks and plaque, and he sighed without picking them up. He said, "Father, mother, haven't we agreed not use these checks?"

Zhang Cai smiled bitterly as he replied, "Yes, we did agree to do so at that time. However, the situation has changed, and we are unable to afford a proper bride price, so wouldn't Liu Qing's family suffer a loss of their face?"

Zhang Xiaolong replied, "Father, if our financial situation is not good, then there is no need to go through so much expense. Liu Qing has not agreed to marry in our family because of our background, and during the days when I was in Liu household, teacher Liu had told me many times that he is aware of our situation so he did not mention any requirements on the bride price, and I do not think we have to care about protecting anyone's face."

Guo Sufei said, "Xiaolong-ah, even if the other party did not raise the matter up, it does not mean that they do not care. No one will be unhappy if they receive more presents, so it is best if we made the preparations."

Zhang Xiaolong insisted, "We can't do so, mother. I cannot put our family in danger just to marry my wife. These checks will only invite trouble, and we must never use them."

Guo Sufei said, "I have discussed this many times with your father. Since they have not looked for us during this month, it should be fine. Furthermore, we have this plaque so they might not necessarily dare to do anything to us."

Zhang Xiaolong smiled bitterly and said, "Mother, this plaque was given to us by heroine Xue so that we can protect ourselves when the bullies come to stir up trouble. Do not touch these checks, so that when the bullies come to our doorstep, we can return the money immediately. Otherwise, what can we do if we do not have the money to repay them?"

Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei were dumbfounded, it was not because they were unaware of this fact, but they were too concerned about their son's marriage that they have forgotten about it.

Zhang Xiaolong continued, “The Liu household admires us not because of any material benefits we can bring, instead, don’t we possess something more precious than money? And there will be many opportunities for us to give it to teacher Liu in the future.”

Zhang Cai smiled bitterly as he asked, “What do we have that is more precious than money? Why do I not know about it?”

Zhang Xiaolong smiled mysterious, and said the following sentences.

Chapter 49: Proposal

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Proposal

Zhang Xiaolong smiled as he said, “Our spring water! When I saw teacher Liu drinking the tea that day, he looked even happier than receiving ten silvers. If we give him more of the spring water in the future, not only will he be satisfied, he would be able to keep his body healthy, so wouldn’t that be better than any other gifts? Oh right, father, when you go over this time round, take the opportunity to suggest to teacher Liu to migrate over here. I could see that he has some intention of doing so but had too many reservations. Now that Liu Qing is coming over, I believe that he will be more willing to follow as well. In this way, it will be easier for Liu Qing and I to look after him as well. What do you think?”

Zhang Cai exchanged glances with Guo Sufei and said, “I will definitely raise these points when I go over. In this case, you can keep the checks and plaque for the time being, and if the need truly arises, you can cash the checks whenever you want.”

Zhang Xiaolong pondered and said, “Alright then, I will hold on to them for now.”

After finishing his sentence, he kept the checks and plaque into his breast.

Since Zhang Xiaolong was not agreeable to using the checks, the bride price that the Zhang household prepared was a lot simpler, which were the usual few gifts that they have prepared many times before. This particular morning, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei wore their newest clothes and set off towards Bali Gou to prepare the most important event of Zhang Xiaolong’s life.

When Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei reached the Liu’s household, they were

received with a warm welcome. When they presented the simple bride price, teacher Liu did not seem to mind at all, and he respectfully received them. Seeing his reaction, the Zhang couple could not help but feel relieved. There was only butcher Liu's family waiting for them in the house, so it seemed that teacher Liu was not one who placed much importance to crowds or customs. However, Liu Qing was not anywhere in the main room, so they thought that she must have hidden herself in embarrassment.

The process of the proposal was simple but strict; everything had to be done in the accorded hour and in the right order. When the ceremony was close to its end, both parties would discuss the wedding plans together. Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei receded the final decision to teacher Liu, and they only requested that the wedding be held sooner because the grandmother's health was deteriorating very quickly, and her final wish was to see her grandson get married.

Teacher Liu pondered for quite a while, and he took out a calendar of auspicious dates to flip through. However, his brows wrinkled which caused Zhang Cai to feel anxious again. After half a bell worth of time, teacher Liu raised his head and said, "Looking at the dates, the closest one is at the end of the month, and the next closest date is in June. If we hold the wedding by this month, wouldn't it be too rushed? As for the later date, the old woman might..." Teacher Liu left his sentence in the air.

As expected, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei wrinkled their brows, and Guo Sufei asked hopefully, "Is there no suitable dates in between?"

Teacher Liu replied, "There are some auspicious dates in between, but they are all incompatible with Xiaolong and Qingqing's eight words."

Zhang Cai let out a long sigh before saying, "Ai, then we will have in the wedding in June. There are only a few days to the end of the month, and the house for the new couple has not been prepared yet. What can we scramble up with using only these few days?"

Teacher Liu nodded his head and said, "Then we have no other choice, but as for the grandmother?"

At that moment, a voice came from outside saying, "Father, I think it is better if we hold it this month instead."

Everyone looked over, and the person who entered was indeed Liu Qing who had been listening to their conversation from outside the whole time.

Liu Qing flushed as she said, “Uncle, auntie, seeing that Xiaolong’s wedding is grandmother’s last wish, we should do our part as children and grandchildren to try and fulfill it. Actually, how grand the wedding should depend on us, there is no need for it to be too magnificent because it will not be realistic anyway. I also think that you not need prepare a new house and just find some another place for us to stay temporarily. Hasn’t father been considering migrating to Guo village? You can take this opportunity to buy a piece of land beside the Zhang household, build some small rooms and a surrounding fence, and wouldn’t that be a home already? When the house is ready, not only you, but Xiaolong and I can move in together, and we can take care of you and uncle’s family as well. What do you think?”

Liu Qing’s idea seemed too incredible, but after careful consideration, it was actually quite realistic. The grandmother’s body most probably cannot hold out until June, and if she passed away before then, the wedding would have to be postponed again. Furthermore, it was the grandmother’s last wish to see her grandson’s wedding ceremony, so they should have held the wedding at the end of February. The Zhang household could not hold a large scale wedding with their financial situation, but a simple wedding can be done easily and quickly. All they needed was for some of the fellow villagers to help out and everything would be ready in a few days’ time. The largest obstacle was the new house for the newlywed, because it would take at least a few months to build a house from scratch. Liu Qing wanted to be close enough to take care of her father, so their homes had to be close enough; why not just live together instead? However, Zhang Cai was currently thinking that his daughter-in-law has not yet married into his family and she has already planned to live apart from them, could she have the intention to not get closer to their family?”

However, he changed his mind after thinking about it twice. What was there in his family that Liu Qing would be greedy of? It was only that well, and the reason why Liu Qing persuaded her father to move was obviously because of his well-being, which was an act of filial piety. As for Xiaolong and Liu Qing to move out, it was only a matter of time, and their family has three sons so how could they all

continue to live together? Even though it was slightly early to raise the topic, after some careful consideration, it was almost the most appropriate solution. At least, Liu Qing had looked far enough in the future and had taken Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua into consideration.

As for teacher Liu, he naturally had no objections to the matter. He had always worried about his retirement, and he knew that he would be welcomed in most places as a scholar. Knowing that there was no teacher in Guo village, he would definitely have no problems migrating over. Furthermore, with his daughter to rely on, while being able to protect his daughter, wasn't it the perfect outcome for him? He was still thinking about how to raise the issue of his migration to Zhang Cai, and now that his daughter has raised it for him, wasn't the timing perfect as well?

However, there were people who objected to the idea as well, and that was naturally the members of butcher Liu's household.

Butcher Liu bellowed, "Elder brother, why did you not discuss with me your intention to migrate to Guo village. The both of us have lived in Bali Gou all our lives."

Teacher Liu replied gently, "Second brother, am I not considering this now as well? Qingqing is moving faraway, and she will be alone with no one to look after her. Liu Kai and I will also be living without any woman to look after the household, so the days here will not be as smooth sailing as before."

Liu Yueyue interrupted, "But uncle, don't you have me? Haven't I been helping around during this period?"

Teacher Liu smiled as he replied, "Yueyue-ah, I know that you have been extending yourself during this period, and it is not going to be a long term solution for us both. Now that your elder sister is getting married, will your own marriage be any further away? Even if you are married to a family in Bali Gou, you cannot possibly come over daily to look after uncle. Furthermore, Liu Kai should be looking for a wife now, and this house is going to be left to him. Although I will not force him, I do not know when he will ever get married."

Liu Kai flushed as he said, "Father, look at what you are saying. I just have not found the right person yet."

Teacher Liu gave him a look and said, "Then you should start looking seriously, and take advantage that you sister is getting married this year to give me a double blessing and surprise."

Liu Kai was speechless thereafter.

Then, teacher Liu said to butcher Liu, "Second brother, even though the Guo village is said to be far, it only takes half a day worth of travel so even if I moved there, it will still be convenient for us to visit each other in the future. Furthermore, your dealings as a butcher does not intersect with my teaching, and we will still have our brotherhood between us which will not fade as time goes by. In the future, if you are bored of the life in Bali Gou, you can even move in with me."

Teacher Liu knew that butcher Liu could not be counted to keep a secret, so he did not tell him about the spring water, although if the water does end up to be effective, then teacher Liu would definitely try to bring butcher Liu and his family over.

Seeing that no one else had any other objections or concerns, he set the date of the wedding to be on the last day of February. Then, he turned to Zhang Cai as the two men began to discuss the wedding specifics, while Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue excused themselves.

After entering Liu Qing's room, Liu Yueyue asked, "Elder sister, why are you as impatient as Xiaolong to move out so quickly?"

Liu Qing replied, "It is not what you think, the grandmother in Zhang's household has no much time left; the last time I went over, she was already coughing blood. After a life of hardships, I would hope to fulfill a single wish of hers. Furthermore, you are well aware of the financial situation of his family, if the wedding proceeded in a hurry, it would actually be a relief of their burden and make Xiaolong and my future life easier. This decision of mine was definitely made in consideration of my own interests."

Liu Yueyue said, "The last time after we spoke, I went back to think about what you said. I feel that this fate you mentioned is very strange, the both of you had not known each other for more than two months and yet were living under the same roof. Now that I think about it, it was quite mystical."

Liu Qing smiled as she said, “You have the choice as well, I have seen the way Zhang Xiaohu looked at you, and I am sure he would like to live under the same roof as you too.”

Liu Yueyue’s face turned red and said, “Elder sister should stop teasing me, I have already told you before at Zhang’s place that I only have feelings of gratitude towards him. To borrow your words, there is no fate between us. Furthermore, Mr Zhao from Xue village had sent some men over to ask my hand for marriage on behalf of his second son, Zhao Yuzhao. I have met this Zhao Yuzhao in person before, he has a good background and decent appearance, but because of your affairs, my father was too busy to reply him. Once your wedding is over, it may be my turn to get married off soon.”

Hearing her words, Liu Qing’s heart was jumping for joy, and she said, “You little rascal, to think that you are hiding such a big secret from me. I have met this Zhao Yuzhao before, his knowledge and appearance is indeed quite decent and suited for you. Yueyue, your luck is pretty good.”

Chapter 50: Wedding

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Wedding

Liu Yueyue laughed as she said, “No matter how lucky I am, it still cannot beat your fate, which was sent to you by the heavens. You can savor your happiness slowly, while I try to hold on to that dream of mine, to listen to my husband recite my favorite poetry, exchange verses with me, look at the scenery when we are idle, and I will serve him dutifully in the night.”

Liu Qing said, “Yueyue, love is sweet but we have to be realistic about life. I had the same dream as you, but the heavens arranged someone like Zhang Xiaolong to me, so I can only accept my village life. Everyone has their own different lives, but I hope that we both get to achieve our own happiness.”

Liu Yueyue said, “Elder sister, I believe that we will find our happiness. However, I want to ask elder sister for the last time: have you truly decided to marry this person from Guo village who has less than ten characters in his vocabulary? Ten years down the road, are you sure you will not regret about your decision today?”

Upon hearing her question, Liu Qing pulled Liu Yueyue and said, “Yueyue, there are some things that cannot be explained by reason. Perhaps the masses are right and I will regret my decision ten years later. However, I do not regret my decision at this current moment. If I am over-cautious and did not make my stand today, I would lose the opportunity to make my own choices. Life is the result of our choices, different choices will lead to a different path in life, if you and I had made the same choice, then wouldn't there be joy in variety of life? Xiaolong may be a village farmer, but he knows his letters and more importantly, he is not a stone that cannot be sculpted. I believe that our differences will lead to some conflicts, but we will also change each other in the process. Perhaps I

will not need someone to recite poetry to me, instead I will teach him to read and write; we will not have a beautiful courtyard to admire, but he will farm while I sew. In short, we will slowly change so that our lives will become happier.”

Liu Yueyue smiled as she said, “Elder sister, you have always been more studious than me, and have read more books than me. I will not be able to out-talk you, but I cannot help but feel that you will suffer if you marry into the Zhang household. Why would you want to give yourself so much discomfort?”

Liu Qing replied, “Yueyue, you are still holding on to some prejudice. These two words ‘happiness’ is the same for everyone, whether or not you are rich or poor. You will not necessarily be happier if you have more money than the other person, and the reason why I chose to be poor over rich was to pursue this happiness. There is happiness in hardship and luxury, as long as one is happy, why would he be afraid of hardships? As the saying goes ‘How does one know if the fish you set free is happy?’ There is only so much happiness in the world, if you are happier, then the other person will be less happy, and vice versa. Rather than to give your happiness away, why not lead each day happily?”

Hearing her words, Liu Yueyue wrinkled her brows as if she was confused. However, she said immediately, “Elder sister, my aim was to persuade you, but now I have confused myself. No matter what, your words are right and I have no interest towards that Zhang Xiaohu.”

Liu Qing said, “You little rascal, I was only sharing my perspective with you, I did not try to play the role of a matchmaker.”

While the two ladies were discussing in their room, the two families in the main room had finished discussing over the major points of the marriage. The day was becoming late, and if they did not leave soon, their return journey would have to be covered at night. However, teacher Liu was reluctant to let them leave, so dinner was prepared in his house. After all, after that day, the two households can be considered as one large family, so the dinner was exceptionally delicious and joyful.

In the early morning of the next day, when the sky was still gloomy, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei bade their farewells and hurriedly left for Guo village. There were

not many days till the end of the month, so they had many things to prepare for the wedding.

After the two parents reached Guo village and shared the news to Zhang Xiaolong, as well as the Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohu who was waiting beside him, they all jumped in joy as they felt that this future sister-in-law is too capable to have thought of such an idea. They had not realized that they would be meeting her so soon, and when the grandmother heard of the matter, she would not stop praising “This good child, what a good daughter-in-law” for the next few days. If she could stand up, she would have immediately burned some incense to pray in thanks for being able to find such a good granddaughter-in-law.

Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei’s family had a good reputation in Guo village, and since this was the first wedding within the household, the rest of the villagers were naturally eager to help out. Many people have also met Liu Qing, and even though the Zhang household had never announced their true relationship, there were many people who gossiped behind their backs. Once news of their upcoming marriage was spread, everyone was not too surprised, they only felt that it was quite rushed but when someone mentioned the grandmother, everyone became enlightened and they could not help but praise Liu Qing again.

The way a farmer prepares a wedding is quite simple. They would erect a shed in the courtyard, place a large table in the house and find a good chef to prepare some delicacies. Then, when the well-wishers arrive and they would be hosted in the shed. The bridal room has to be prepared as well, and the couple had planned to use the three brothers’ room as a temporary solution. Zhang Xiaohu was chased out and forced to share a bed with Zhang Xiaohua, while the house in the courtyard was renovated simply. Fortunately, many hands make the work light, and under the help of the villagers, all the preparations were completed in time. On the wedding day, the entire Zhang courtyard was filled with a merry and joyous atmosphere.

The sky was still dark but there were already sounds of shouting in the Zhang courtyard. Many people had arrived and were busy with their own tasks, some of the village housewives has come to help arrange the tables and chairs and prepare the vegetables, while the chef has started a large fire in preparation to

cook. Zhang Xiaolong was woken up early in the morning to get ready to ride over to Bali Gou with the troupe and procession to pick up his wife.

The route they chose was naturally not the small road which they would usually take, so the time spent on the journey was longer than usual, and they still had to hurry back before afternoon to not miss the auspicious hour. Just as everyone was ready to leave, Guo Sufei suddenly realized that the one of the best man, Zhang Xiaohua, was not around, so she urgently asked Zhang Xiaohu to find him. Zhang Xiaohu felt strange, he was woken up early by the bustle of the preparations, and had called Zhang Xiaohua up before he went out to help, but could the latter still be sleeping? Indeed, when he returned to his room, he found Zhang Xiaohua sleeping like a log on his bed, and would not wake up no matter how hard he tried, even when he splashed water and shook his body. Unfortunately, the job of the best man was already assigned to him, and they could not find another replacement on such short notice. Fortunately, there was a sedan, and the grandmother knew that Zhang Xiaohua would always sleep until the sun rose, so everyone carried Zhang Xiaohua into the sedan, and the matchmaker willingly gave up her spot for him.

The procession thus carried the sleeping Zhang Xiaohua as they walked in the darkness to Bali Gou, and after walking for half the distance, a ray of sunlight appeared in the sky and flashed across the sedan. Only then did Zhang Xiaohua open his eyes, and as he rubbed his eyes, he realized that he was sleeping in an unfamiliar place, and opened the sedan windows in surprise before realizing the situation and hurriedly greeting the people below. Thus, the procession paused for Zhang Xiaohua to get off, and the boy immediately ran to the horse in front where Zhang Xiaolong was seated to apologize. Zhang Xiaolong carried him up onto the horse and said while hugging him, “Xiaohua-ah, there is no need to be sorry, you are still growing so it is understandable. However, you have widened my horizon, for I have never seen someone like you who could not be woken even when we poured water over you.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face reddened as he said apologetically, “I do not know why either, perhaps I have always been sleeping like that but never had to wake up so early before.”

Zhang Xiaolong pondered and felt that he could be right, he had slept with his

younger brother for so long yet there was never anything strange, and there was a never a need to wake up so early before so Xiaohua could probably be sleeping like this all this while. As long as it was not some illness, and there is no need for him to wake up this early, then there should be no need to pursue this matter any further.

There was not much distance left in the journey, and under the excited feelings of Zhang Xiaolong and the idle chatter of the brothers, the distance was covered soon after.

Bali Gou village entrance could be seen from afar. At that moment, Zhang Xiaolong stopped his horse and allowed the procession to rest for a short while, before letting out the firecrackers and getting the musician troupe to start playing their instruments. Zhang Xiaohua obediently get off the horse and held the reins for his brother, and he walked in the front of everyone else while leading the horse.

Some men from the Liu household were already waiting at the village entrance since early in the morning, and when they saw the oncoming procession, someone immediately ran to inform teacher Liu. The peaceful stillness was also broken by the loud blaring music, so everyone in Bali Gou was woken by the sounds of the celebration. There were also many children who blocked the procession while asking for sweets which the Zhang household had naturally prepared earlier on, and although the procession had to be stopped several times, everyone was in high spirits as this was a custom of the village. Everyone deserved a small slice of happiness when someone gets married, and as more people came over to grab their share, the times when the procession was obstructed grew even more frequent.

Chapter 51: Bow

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Bow

When the procession finally reached its destination, the sky was already bright. There were many people waiting at the entrance, and Zhang Xiaohua led the horse to in front of them where he finally stopped. When Zhang Xiaolong got off the horse, Zhang Xiaohua passed the reins of the horse to one of the Liu household members.

Everyone came forward to shake Zhang Xiaolong's hands while they congratulated, "Congratulations to the groom." Zhang Xiaolong was naturally happy to receive their well wishes, and after a while, everyone made a path for him to walk through. When Zhang Xiaohua looked ahead, he saw a large wooden board on the side of the door, and there was a bow on the wooden board. There was a rule in the village, the first thing the groom has to do when he picks up his wife was to shoot three arrows towards the sky as if he was chasing all the evil demons and spirits away. Zhang Xiaolong has seen this custom being practiced before, but his arms had just recovered enough for him to work in the fields so how could he have the strength to pull the bow?

It seemed that this responsibility had to be passed on to the best man Zhang Xiaohua. However, Zhang Xiaohua was only a twelve or thirteen year old boy, so it was too much to expect such a thing from him. Thus, there were expressions of dismay among the onlookers. Just as Zhang Xiaolong was about to step forward to pick up the bow, Zhang Xiaohua immediately snatched it away and said, "Eldest brother, your arm has just recovered, how could you play around with this? If you injure yourself, then wouldn't all the recovery time spent so far be wasted, let me do this instead."

Zhang Xiaolong smiled and said, "It is no problem, I can still do something as

simple as pulling a bow. You are still young, how would you have the strength to pull it?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled back and said, “Eldest brother, you are looking down on me too much. I can reclaim my own field, so how would I not have enough strength for this. Let me try first, and if I fail, you can do it instead. Anyway, it will not be a loss of face, so what do you say?”

Zhang Xiaolong pondered and agreed. He thought that the best man was supposed to help the groom do such things in a wedding, and even if Xiaohua could not pull the bow, he could still do it himself. Teacher Liu would have already known about the condition of his arm, so the bow on the wooden board should be a flexible one that did not require much strength to pull.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua walked over to the wooden board and picked up the bow which was as tall as him, his hands looked like they were struggling with its weight. After all, Zhang Xiaohua has never strung a bow before. Then, he picked up a headless arrow and placed it on the bow, before turning his head back towards Zhang Xiaolong and asked “Eldest brother, where do I aim the arrow?”

Zhang Xiaolong pointed towards the sky in the direction of the village entrance and said, “Shoot it there then.”

Zhang Xiaohua agreed and as monkey see monkey do, he adopted a horse stance and raised the bow towards the sky. He tried to pull the string back, but it was taut and stiff, and his face flushed from the effort. By rights, he could have released the arrow then, but this being his first time, and he had seen other people pull the bow until it formed the shape of a full moon, he assumed that the bow was not pulled enough so he took another deep breath, tightened the muscles in his arms, and with a roar, he extended the bow into the shape of a full moon. Seeing the results of his effort, he looked towards the sky confidently and released the bow. The arrow shot like a comet into the distance, while Zhang Xiaohua’s heart jumped in joy.

Zhang Xiaohua shot the remaining two arrows with hesitation, and after they flew far away beyond the view from Bali Gou, Zhang Xiaohua’s arm began to feel the tingling sensation of exhaustion, and he had difficulties raising the bow to put it back onto the wooden board. At that moment, everyone in the audience

was full of praise of Zhang Xiaohua's strength, and only Zhang Xiaolong noticed his fatigue and took the bow from the latter to return it to its original position. When he took the bow from Zhang Xiaohua, Zhang Xiaolong was surprised when its weight exceeded his expectations, how could a flexible bow be so heavy? However at this moment, everyone crowded around him leaving him no time to ponder about the issue, and they pulled him into the courtyard as the bow was left alone on the wooden board.

Just as Zhang Xiaolong was dragged into the Liu courtyard, hunter Zhang from the north of Bali Gou was packing his bundle in preparation to go hunting. As he entered the small room where the bow was kept, his temper rose as he asked his wife, "The children's mother, where the bow which was placed on the board?"

His wife was confused and she asked, "What bow? How would I know, I have never entered that room before."

Hunter Zhang became anxious, and he said, "That was my family's heirloom, the five stone bow, it was placed at the rightmost side of the board. I saw it there two days ago, but it disappeared today, could it be that our house was broken into?"

His wife was currently placing breakfast on the table; suddenly, she seemed to have remembered something and ran out urgently, saying, "I recalled, the children's father. Yesterday, teacher Liu sent someone to come over to borrow a bow, most probably to use for his daughter's wedding today, and was afraid that the groom could not pull a normal bow so he specifically asked for a flexible one. I was folding the children's clothes at that time, so I let them invite themselves into your room to take one out. I remembered you saying that you had made one for fun and placed it on the board, so I relayed that to the other party."

Hunter Zhang asked, "Then did you see which bow he took out?"

His wife answered apologetically, "He did show it to me, but I was too lazy to take a look because it was the toy you made casually."

Hunter Zhang immediately scolded, "You failure of all mothers, not even bothering to look at what people had borrowed from us. They have taken our family heirloom, and you were too lazy to take a single glance. Furthermore, teacher Liu has been very good to us, and our children were all taught by him. I

am sure that he has borrowed a flexible bow for a good reason, and now that you have given him a bow which no one has managed to pull in decades, aren't you making a laughing stock out of him? Just wait and see how I will punish you when I come back."

After he finished his sentence, he ran out in a hurry. By the time he reached the entrance of the Liu household, Zhang Xiaolong and the party had already entered the courtyard, and his bow was displayed out there on the wooden board beside the entrance. From his conjecture, the groom or his best man must have failed to pull the bow, and had left it here after entering the house in shame. At that moment, he saw one of the Liu household helpers, and he said emotionally, "Liu third boy, let teacher Liu know that I have taken this bow away."

The person inside replied in acknowledgement, "Alright, I got it."

Hunter Zhang quickly carried the bow back home, while hiding it under his arms in fear that someone would obstruct and scold him for making a fool out of the occasion. Thus, he did not notice that the three arrows which should have been placed together with the bow were missing.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaolong was accompanied by Zhang Xiaohua as he walked to the door of Liu Qing's room which was closed under the village's custom when the groom has to answer the bride's question satisfactorily when he wishes to enter her door. Zhang Xiaolong was now under a difficult situation, teacher Liu was a learned man and all the people who were in the house were all scholars with no knowledge of martial arts. If not, they would have been able to spot the abnormality when Zhang Xiaohua drew the bow. Even though teacher Liu had told his friends and students not to put his son-in-law into a difficult situation, there were quite a few of the men who were unhappy that their proposals were rejected, and while they did not dare to go against teacher Liu's instructions too blatantly, they had pondered deeply to formulate a question to embarrass Zhang Xiaolong. Liu Yueyue was the bridesmaid for the occasion, and that girl seldom used her brains when she did things so the first question which Zhang Xiaolong faced was, "Write some words to display your calligraphy."

When the question appeared, Liu Qing who was waiting in her room patiently glared at Liu Yueyue and asked, "Whose idea was this? Why did you not inform

me?”

Liu Yueyue teased as she replied, “Elder sister, a bunch of people outside suggested it. Even though this would embarrass brother-in-law, but it is fine as long as it spurs him to learn to write in the future. What do you think?”

Liu Qing smiled bitterly as she thought to herself, what can I do? The question has already been announced, can I pull it back? Sigh, I wonder if Xiaolong will blame me after this.

Teacher Liu who was in the main room had an ugly expression on his face as well; this was obviously a ploy to embarrass his son-in-law. However, a wedding is supposed to be a bustling merry affair, and he could not blame anyone for playing such a joke on this occasion. For now, all he could do was to watch Zhang Xiaolong write some random words, after all, he was only a farmer.

The faces on the two Zhang brothers also turned into surprise, but Zhang Xiaolong thought, what is there to be afraid of, so he took a deep breath and walked forward thinking that he would just write some random letters. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua pulled his brother’s arms and said, “No harm being cautious, eldest brother. Let me try this as well.”

“You, can you do it?” Zhang Xiaolong asked doubtfully.

Zhang Xiaohua patted his arm and said, “My answer is the same as before: if I fail, you can take over.”

Then, Zhang Xiaohua walked up to the front and announced to the audience, “Esteemed guest, as we have mentioned, my eldest brother’s arm is not fully healed, so I will write the words in his stead.”

Then, he walked to the brush and ink which was already prepared beforehand, and he lowered his head in deep thought. Then, his eyes brightened, and he raised his head and announced, “Esteemed guests, since today is a happy occasion, then I will not use this brush and paper to dampen the mood.”

Everyone was curious as they asked, “Then what will you use?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered, “Is there a mop? I would like to use a mop to write some large calligraphy for everyone.”

“Mop? How do you write with that?” Some people asked in curiosity. As they were discussing, someone already took out a mop, and Zhang Xiaohua had found a pot. He poured the ink into the pot and dipped the mop into it. Then, using both hands to hold on to the mop, he carefully dragged the mop across the green stone floor as though he was dancing and wrote the two words, “Piaomiao”.

The words were written in an old-style cursive, which was elegant with its own distinctive flavor. When they saw Zhang Xiaohua wrote the words, the spectators were all surprised into a daze. When teacher Liu heard the sounds of their gasp, he walked out of the main hall and saw the two large characters on the green stone floor, and turned silent as he admired the words in surprise.

About these two words “Piaomiao”, they were the words on the plaque which Zhang Xiaohua had asked someone to read for him, and was now etched into his heart without missing a single detail of its strokes or cursive lines. Therefore, even though Zhang Xiaohua did not know how to write, he was able to produce these two words easily. Of course, since he had no practice in calligraphy, he had chosen to use a mop which would distract everyone’s attention due to the ridiculousness of the idea.

Chapter 52: Difficult question

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Difficult question

Of course, there were some people who could not read among the spectators. Butcher Liu was the first to ask, “Why is everyone keeping silent? Is it a bad word that he wrote?”

His words shook everyone in the audience awake, and they clapped their hands in praise, saying, “Well written, very well written. It looks casual, yet is full of individuality; it is rare to see such good penmanship.”

The men among the spectators who had ill intentions were also forced to admit their inferiority. They thought in their hearts, “This teacher Liu, the youngest brother of his son-in-law is already so accomplished in calligraphy, not to mention the elder brother. Who said that he was uneducated and boorish, if such a standard is considered boorish, then what do we count as?”

Teacher Liu’s gaze was still lingering on the words on the green stone floor, he was well aware of Zhang Xiaolong’s literary standards, yet this Zhang Xiaohua who was of a younger age, and whom he had always treated as a little boy, had such high accomplishment in calligraphy. It seemed that he ‘had eyes but could not see Mount Tai’, and would have to observe this boy more closely in the future.

Even though Zhang Xiaolong was also curious, he knew that now was not the time to ask so he welcomed the second question from the bridesmaid.

Indeed, the second question was another literary question: Compose a poem.

Zhang Xiaolong, Zhang Xiaohua, Liu Qing and teacher Liu all broke out in cold sweat when they saw the question, who could have been so shameless? Liu Yueyue was also innocent this time round, and she enlarged her eyes and said,

“That is the revenge of the people you have spurred. If there is anyone to blame, then it would be elder sister for possessing too much charms.”

Zhang Xiaohua was about to go up again, but he was pulled back by Zhang Xiaolong this time, who said, “Xiaohua, watch your eldest brother.”

Zhang Xiaolong lowered his head in deep thought as he paced back and forth, and not long after, he raised his head and addressed the audience, “Esteemed guests, I am a simple farmer in Guo village who only knows how to work in the fields, and therefore cannot be compared to any of you. However, I have always believed that everything has a purpose in life, scholars have their responsibilities, and farmers have their roles to play, and neither can do without the other. Today, I will try my best to write a poem, and I hope you can give me your pointers.”

After he finished his sentence, he raised his voice and said, “I was an immortal from the heavens, who has descended on earth for decades, just waiting for the winds to congregate, before I can soar up into the sky again.”

This time, everyone was surprised again. Even though the poem did not have a good rhyme or rhythm, and even their phrasing was slightly awkward and inappropriate, the meaning it embodied was proud and its mood was distinguished, so they did not know how to judge it. At this moment, teacher Liu said, “Nephew’s poem is indeed very good, its mood is forthcoming and if he is willing to put more effort in learning, I am sure he will be able to reach greater heights.”

Upon hearing his speech, some people in the audience said, “Teacher Liu, you are still calling him your nephew, isn’t it time to change your manner of address?”

At this moment, the audience broke out into a cacophony, but at least, everyone agreed that the answer had fulfilled the requirements of the second question. Zhang Xiaohua threw a thumbs up to Zhang Xiaolong, while the latter smiled as he wiped the sweat off his face.

As Zhang Xiaolong walked again to Liu Qing’s door, the third question appeared: If you can compare the bride to an item, what would it be?

This question was trickier as everyone’s answer would be different, and all

their answers could be considered to be good answers. However, for such questions, they are in actuality more difficult to answer.

Many people in the audience started to think in their minds, how would they answer the question if they were in his shoes? However, this question was too easy for Zhang Xiaolong, who replied almost immediately, “I hope that Qingqing is a mirror that heaven has sent to me. If I have made any mistakes, she would remind and reprimand me. I hope that Qingqing is the stalk of a lotus that heaven has sent to me, so that we can love each other forever. I hope that Qingqing is a walking stick that the heaven has sent to me, so that when we both grow old, we have each other to lean on.” Zhang Xiaolong’s answers were simple and honest, and it struck straight into everyone’s hearts. Liu Qing indeed had a good eye to find someone who truly loved her, and those people who were initially unhappy had no choice but to admit that Zhang Xiaolong was truly dedicated towards her. Thus, the audience broke into an applause, and Liu Yueyue who was in the room listening had stars appeared in her eyes as she smiled excitedly until her face was red, and she said to Liu Qing, “Elder sister, how could you pick such a deep person? Even though brother-in-law has not read many books, how could his thoughts be so deep? Could it be the elder sister has been cramming his head with all sorts of things to mold him into a person like that?”

Liu Qing scolded smilingly, “You little rascal, stop thinking of such ridiculous things. I had not expected Zhang Xiaolong to be so accomplished in literary aspects, I had not taught him anything yet. I only suspected that he had potential to be uncovered, and it seems now that I was not wrong. Hehe, Yueyue, why have you not opened the door yet?” After she finished her sentence, she threw the red veil over her face.

Liu Yueyue replied, “Understood, bride of the day.” Then, she opened the door.

When the audience saw the door of the bride’s room opened, they knew that the bride has approved of the answers, and they naturally burst into cheers. Then, Zhang Xiaolong entered the room under the bridesmaid Liu Yueyue’s supervision, and carefully led Liu Qing out into the main hall. Teacher Liu was already seated there as he waited for Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing to come up to

him to kneel. The newlywed kneeled thrice towards him, and after they did so, teacher Liu stood up and supported them to do so as well. At that moment, Liu Qing felt a sudden pang of sadness as she realized that she has officially left her household, and she began to cry uncontrollably. From that day on, she would no longer belong to this household, and when she thought of the nostalgic times since her childhood, and of her mother who could not be present to see her then, how could she have controlled her emotions? Teacher Liu walked to Zhang Xiaolong who immediately called him father-in-law, and he placed Liu Qing's hands into his as he said, "Xiaolong, I am entrusting Qingqing to you. You must remember the things I have mentioned before, and treat her well, and do not let her down."

Zhang Xiaolong received Liu Qing's hands and said seriously, "Father-in-law, I will sincerely take good care of Qingqing. You can watch me in the future as I will not let you down."

Then, teacher Liu walked to Liu Qing's front and said, "Qingqing, you are from this day on a member of the Zhang household. You have to be a good, supportive wife, and lead a good, happy life with Xiaolong. I won't say too much, but I hope that the two of you can lead a long, happy life together."

Liu Qing cried as she said, "I understand, father. We will do so."

Then, teacher Liu said, "Alright, both of you can hurry back now. The other party must still be waiting for you."

Thus, Zhang Xiaolong pulled Liu Qing's hands as he led her up to the sedan which was waiting outside for a while, before he got up onto his horse which Zhang Xiaohua led from one side and Liu Yueyue stood on the other side. Then, the entire procession began to move away from the Liu household and back to the village entrance.

Seeing the procession disappear slowly from his sight, teacher Liu would not help but let the tears fall from his eyes. The daughter whom he has raised has finally been married off to another household, and it reminded him of his deceased wife who was unable to participate in the wedding although he believed that she would be in heaven watching out for their daughter's happiness.

At this moment, Liu Kai appeared by his side, and he comforted his father, “Father, Xiaolong is a good child, and the members of the Zhang household are sensible people. Younger sister would not suffer any inconvenience when she is married over, and furthermore, aren’t you planning to follow them soon? If anything happens, you would still be the first to know, and thus younger sister’s life will not be very different from how it was like here.”

Teacher Liu sighed as he nodded and shook his head, before turning back into the house.

When Zhang Xiaolong brought the procession out of Bali Gou’s village, he looked up into the sky and saw that it was already three poles after morning. Thus, he said to Zhang Xiaohua and Liu Yueyue, “It seems that we are slightly behind on time, so we will have to rush for the remainder of the trip. Xiaohua, you can ride the horse with me. Yueyue, you can take the sedan as well, since the bridesmaid should have a sedan by rights.” The two followed Zhang Xiaolong’s instructions as they climbed up the horse and sedan, and the procession quicken their steps as they rushed to Guo village in hopes of making it before noon.

The people in the procession had already eaten and rested while Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohua were inside the Liu household, even the horse was fed, and thus, they did not play any instruments as they rushed back to Guo village.

They still had to take the main road on their way back, and by this time, there were already many passersby on the road. Some of the passersby would point and gossip while trying to guess the appearance of the bride which was hidden under the curtains of the sedan.

Chapter 53: Misfortunate encounter

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Misfortunate encounter

The procession had been rushing non-stop, and after a bell worth of time, Zhang Xiaolong looked at the sky and said, "It still seems early, and since we have completed half of our journey, there should be no problem reaching Guo village in time. Let's take a short break, and we can carry on the journey after we are rested."

Apart from Zhang Xiaolong, Zhang Xiaohua, Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue, everyone in the procession were tired from all the rush, not to mention the people carrying the sedan. The musician troupe also had to carry their musical instruments, so when everyone heard the two words 'rest', they immediately walked to the side of the road and planted their butts onto the ground, while some took out their gourds to quench their thirst.

The sedan was placed carefully on the ground under a big tree, and the several sedan carriers went off in their own directions to rest. Zhang Xiaolong also got off his horse and took Zhang Xiaohua as they walked towards the sedan. He took two leather pouches from the horse and passed one to Zhang Xiaohua, while he walked over to the side of the sedan with the other and asked, "Qingqing, are you thirsty, would you like some water?"

Liu Qing did not answer, but the bridesmaid Liu Yueyue spoke up for her, "Elder sister is probably not thirsty, she is probably still drunk on that flowers talk earlier. Why do you only think of your bride, isn't there still me in the sedan? Why don't you ask if I am thirsty as well?"

Zhang Xiaolong had only met Liu Yueyue several times before, and she had heard Liu Qing mentioned about the straightforward personality of hers, so he

did not mind her teasing and said, "Isn't she the elder sister and you the younger sister? Of course I would have to ask the more senior person first."

Liu Yueyue continued to speak, "Ah.....I did not expect brother-in-law to be such a quick minded person, why did I not notice this before? Hehe, elder sister's eyes sure are sharp." Then, she asked softly, "Elder sister, would you like some water?"

Liu Qing did not remove the veil on her face, and she replied softly, "I am not thirsty, but I will have some to wet my throat. You can drink first if you are thirsty."

Liu Yueyue replied, "Alright, I will help myself first. I have been busy helping out in your wedding and had yet to drink a sip of water since this morning. I even had to talk quite a bit earlier when they came to fetch you so my throat is feeling very dry now. I will pass it to you after I am done."

After she finished her sentence, Liu Yueyue lifted the curtains walked out of the sedan.

Zhang Xiaolong was standing beside the sedan when he saw Liu Yueyue came out, and he hurriedly passed the leather pouch filled with water over to her.

At that moment, several men on horses were appeared on the road which led to Lu town. The three horses were the handsome and majestic Huangbiao horses, and the men who rode on them looked alike; their skin were dark and tanned, their eyes were small and squint, and they looked roughly around forty years of age, while their clothes were bright. The four horses behind were ordinary but large horses, and the men had figures of different heights and width, and they all wore black while bearing weapons at their waist, with their gaze were focused warily on their surroundings.

The men could see Zhang Xiaolong and their party resting beside the road from afar, and did not seem to mind as they continued to rush ahead. Coincidentally, as one of the three men in front was striking his horse with his whip, he saw Liu Yueyue stepped out from the sedan and took the leather water pouch from Zhang Xiaolong while flashing a smile in return. Liu Yueyue was already pretty like a pearl in an oyster, and because she was the bridesmaid for that day, she was dressed up to look even prettier. Although her smile did not mean anything

to Zhang Xiaolong, the man on the horse was mesmerized by the sight before him and he involuntarily let out a gasp as he pulled his reins and slowed the horse down.

The two men on his side noticed his unusual behavior and they turned behind to asked, “Old second, what’s going on?”

The person replied, “Big brother, something good has appeared, do you see that lady beside the sedan?”

The big brother shifted his gaze and smiled reflexively saying, “Hehe, not bad. Even though it cannot be considered as a national treasure, but it is still a jade in a small house.”

The last person continued, “Big brother has not experience any romance during these days in Lu town, but your phrase is very appropriate.”

The old second said, “Big brother, you found a pretty woman last year in that Xin or whatever it was village, and gained both beauty and wealth, but after spending a year with her, we brothers have noticed that you already began to neglect her. Even though there are many pretty young girls in town Lu, we are people who travel often and not stay in any one place for long. Since that lady is not bad, why don’t we bring her up to the mountains so that I can make her my wife?

The big brother replied, “That year was indeed a good bargain. We initially thought that after getting the treasures that he dug from the mountains, there could be nothing else to see but who would have guessed that the daughter in his house was so pretty that I cannot let her go? However, old second, this place is not far from town Lu and is still within the jurisdiction of the authorities, I am afraid that we will attract their attention if we act right now.”

The last person said, “Big brother is thinking too much, even though we are not far from Lu town, there aren’t many people around to welcome that village mudbag. He does not seem to be from the town as well, so let’s just rob whatever we want to. It is not as if we have not done this before. Once we are done, we can just leave our names behind, and I am sure they would not dare to approach the authorities, and since we will return to our hideout immediately, what can the authorities do even if they learnt of it?”

Old second said, "Old third makes a lot of sense, big brother. Let's take action now."

The big brother looked at his surroundings as if he was deliberating.

Old third said, "Old second, the girl in front of the sedan is yours, while the bride in the sedan is mine, today I will get to try being a groom as well. Haha."

Old second replied, "Hehe, I still do not know if the girl in the sedan is fat or skinny, ugly or pretty, so I am uninterested in her. This little wretch looks so tender, I feel that she is just right for me."

Old third said, "Second brother, don't you know this, if the bride is not pretty, how can she get a bridesmaid as pretty as that one there? I believe that the bride is prettier than her."

Old second said, "Old third is so petty, however, if I had not noticed that girl, would you get the chance to become a groom today? Before you enter your room tonight, you will have to toast me three bowls of wine."

Old third smiled back lecherously, "Same to you, let's have fun tonight."

As the three people continued to converse while occasionally throwing glances at the sedan, the four men beside them remained silent and continued to surround them as if they were unsurprised.

Seeing that the big brother was still deliberating, old second asked, "Big brother, what is there to think about? Our brothers had no fresh women this year to take care of their needs, unlike you whose bed has been upgraded with a pretty woman."

The big brother saw that old second was unhappy and old third was jumping with impatience, so he smiled and said, "Alright, who can make the three wolves of Xicui afraid? If big brother has meat to eat, he will not allow his fellow brothers to drink only soup. Today, I will prepare a ticket for our brothers to have a meat buffet."

After finishing his sentence, the three men turned their horses around and rushed towards Xiaolong and his party, while the four men continued to flank from the side.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua has drunk his water and was about to return the leather pouch to his eldest brother. His ears were sensitive, and when he heard the sounds of the horses becoming louder after fading off, he immediately raised his head and saw the seven men rushing towards him. He raised his guard up and urgently called to his brother “Eldest brother, be careful. The group of men who passed us by are coming back, I wonder what for?”

Zhang Xiaolong was talking to Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue and he did not notice the men in horseback passing them by. Upon hearing Zhang Xiaohua’s warning, he immediately raised his head and saw the three wolves of Xicui looking towards his direction with a lecherous gaze, and a thought shouted in his heart, “Oh no, why did we encounter something like this again?”

Just as he thought of letting Liu Yueyue hide back into the sedan, the horses had already reached him. Zhang Xiaolong wrinkled his brows and pulled Liu Yueyue to his back, and he stuck his chest out and asked “How may I help these warriors?”

The person who was right in the front of the pack was the old second of the Xicui wolves, and when he saw Zhang Xiaolong’s greetings, he ignored the latter and continued to urge his horse towards them, before raising his leg to kick towards Zhang Xiaolong’s chest. Although Zhang Xiaolong had not learnt martial arts, he was a youth in the prime of his life and could dodge the blow agilely while pushing Liu Yueyue aside. Thus, the kick landed on the area below his chest, and Zhang Xiaolong’s body flew over on the side of the road, and a mouthful of fresh blood sprayed from his mouth, and his body landed facedown, while the water pouch was thrown to another side with water dribbling out from it.

Zhang Xiaohua saw that his eldest brother was injured, and he hurriedly ran over but the old third of the Xicui wolves rode his horse towards him and raised his whip to lash down onto the boy. When Zhang Xiaohua saw the whip coming down, he tried to move away while raising his hand to catch it. However, his strength was already drained from pulling the bow in the morning and his arms were still not recovered, so he could only turned his head aside as the whip which was about to land on his face struck his shoulders instead. Zhang Xiaohua cried aloud as he fell onto the floor, and the lash on his body was burning in pain

so badly that his tears began to fall.

After old second and old third of the Xicui wolves gained the advantage, they did not stop there and instead rushed over to the other men who were resting along the road side, before freely lashing their whips about. The big brother rode to the front of the sedan and loosened his reins, while he said to the four men beside, “Go help them, and make sure everything is done cleanly.”

The other four men thus turned around and unsheathed their weapons while riding to different spots in the surroundings as they shouted, “Xicui mountain is conducting its business here, get lost if you don’t want to be implicated.”

There were originally people on the road who were looking weirdly upon the men who rushed over to injure the people from the procession, but upon hearing the warnings, they ran like birds from the beast and disappeared soon after.

When the people from the procession saw the groom got injured, they naturally got angry but just as they wanted to get up, they saw the weapons bearing men and imagined their chances of victory. Not only did the other party had weapons, they were the infamous Xicui mountain bandits, where could they get the courage to stand up to these people? They could only try to protect themselves for the sake of their children, so they threw whatever was in their hands and scattered away.

In the blink of an eye, the previously crowded road became desolated apart from Zhang Xiaolong who was lying on the ground, Zhang Xiaohua who was struggling to get up, the worried Liu sisters and the pleased Xicui mountain bandits.

Chapter 54: Misfortune

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Misfortune

Seeing that the people from the procession had all scattered in different directions to flee, the Xicui mountain bandits did not pursue them knowing that these villagers would not have the guts to come back anytime soon. As long as they are not pushed to a corner, these people will not fight back, and by the time they returned, their bandit group would have already returned to their hideout.

The Liu Qing who was still in the sedan did not know what had happened outside, she heard Liu Yueyue and Zhang Xiaolong talking and knew that someone has come. Soon after, she heard Zhang Xiaolong's cry of pain, which made her want to get out of the sedan. However, the village custom dictates that the bride does not remove her veil before the consummation so she hesitated. Then, there was no longer any sound from Zhang Xiaolong, but she could hear Zhang Xiaohua's continuous yelps followed by the warning from the Xicui mountain bandits, and by then, she knew that the situation has turned for the worst. Without any doubts, she tore off her veil, drew the curtains and walked out of the sedan.

What greeted her was the scene of Liu Yueyue's trembling shoulders and the lecherous gaze of the Xicui mountain big brother. The Liu Qing in that moment had been baptized by the spring water of the Zhang household and her beauty was no longer on the same level as Liu Yueyue; her skin was as smooth as jade, her eyebrows were arched with youthfulness and her almond shaped eyes contained liveliness. If the bullies who said that she was not pretty a month ago have seen her again, they would have changed their tunes immediately. She was extremely beautiful at that moment, and her regal aura made her appear more enchanting like an immortal that has descended into the mortal world. The big

brother suddenly felt a pang of regret because this flower has been plucked by old third, and he doubt that the latter would give her up to him. It was a pity indeed.

Liu Qing did not pay any attention to the Xicui mountain big brother, nor did she comfort Liu Yueyue. Instead, she immediately ran up to the unconscious Zhang Xiaolong, and Zhang Xiaohua had managed to stand up by then and was limping in pain as he clenched his teeth and approached his eldest brother.

The Zhang Xiaohua of that moment had only one single thought in his mind, the seed that had budded into his heart was now in full bloom, and his conviction to learn martial arts was stronger than ever before. In order not to be strung like a fish on the line, there was only one route to take in life, and that is to become stronger.

Using absolute power to protect oneself, to protect one's family, and to protect all people that needs protecting.

To prevent anyone from trampling on one's dignity, so that no one would trample on one's family's happiness.

At this moment, our Xiaohua has matured and evolved, because he has found his goal in life.

However, the danger was still in full swing, but Zhang Xiaohua did not pay attention to it because he knew that no matter how devastating the result, time will still flow and the end will come. If he has tried to face his attackers courageously, he might lose his life in the process.

The people of Xicui mountain were unaware that they were adding fuel to the fire which could cause major changes to the Jianghu later on, they were arrogantly riding their horses around while preparing to bring the fresh meat back to their hideout.

Liu Qing ran to Zhang Xiaolong's side and knelt down, she looked on painfully as Zhang Xiaolong's fresh blood dribble to dye his chest red, then carefully raised his head and held it to her bosom. Liu Qing did not cry, she was well aware of the situation she was in, and whatever resistance she put up would only make the assaulters become more excited. Perhaps her fate was already determined, and she has to bade farewell to the person she loved.

When Zhang Xiaohua finally limped over to Zhang Xiaolong's side, Zhang Xiaolong managed to open his eyes weakly. He looked helplessly at his new bride, with regrets filling his heart. Even though the other party did not state their intention for assaulting him, the already awoken Zhang Xiaolong knew what was their aim, but how could he resist them?

He looked at his surroundings with difficulty, and there were only objects but not a single person left in the surroundings. He sighed in regret, his arm has only recovered recently and he sustained yet another injury on his shoulder soon after. He used his other hand to hold on to the hand which was made useless by the previous kick, and the couple looked silently into each other's eyes, and their deep feelings of love and endless resentment was exchanged between them.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw the brother whom he respected and loved, as well as the sister-in-law whom he liked, and the scene in front of him, his heart was struck with pain and torment.

Liu Yueyue who was still by the sedan saw that Zhang Xiaolong has woken up, and she ran over urgently so that she could feel safer there. The Xicui mountain big brother did not obstruct her, and he lazily rode his horse over.

The other men also hurried their horses over to surround their victims.

Old third of the Xicui mountain lashed his whip in the air as he glued his eyes onto the Liu Qing who was still in her bridal dress, and his heart pumped more excitedly as he felt that his efforts have been well worth to be able to find a woman of such a caliber. The old second of Xicui mountain was also staring at Liu Qing, and his heart was full of jealousy as he regretted giving up such a beauty to old third, but he quickly comforted himself when he saw the pale-faced Liu Yueyue. Then, he sneaked a peek at his big brother who seemed enamored by the bride as well, so who knew to whom the bride will end up with, and he was happy as long as his prize was not stolen.

Liu Yueyue saw the approaching men and she instinctively covered her chest with her hands, stuttering, "What... What do you want?"

The old second from Xicui mountain smiled as he said, "I do not want anything much. It's just that our hearts felt itchy when we saw this brother over here getting married, so we wanted to try out the experience of being a groom as

well. When you looked at your sister becoming a bride, don't you want to try it out for yourself as well? Shall we both practice together tonight?"

Even though she already knew what their intentions were, when Liu Yueyue heard his answer, she became even more afraid and said, "You... You..."

Liu Qing's face was as white as paper, but she did not shiver as the person she loved the most was currently in her embrace. Zhang Xiaolong said weakly, "Dear esteemed heroes, this Lu town has no lack of beauties, how can these country girls be worthy of your eyes? If you are willing to let me and my wife go, then we will promise to bring all of our family's wealth up to Xicui mountain."

Old third of the Xicui mountain laughed loudly as he said, "These country girls here have already caught our eyes, and it is your fortune that they have done so. If you can obediently stay here while we bring them back with us, I will allow you to keep your life. If not, I will chop off your head right now so you can dream on about getting another bride again."

Old second of the Xicui mountain also smiled and said, "You don't seem to be from a rich family, what kind of wealth can you bring out to make my heart move? Just obediently give them up."

At that moment, another person riding on a horse appeared and was speeding towards their direction. The Xicui mountain people could hear the sounds of the gallop from afar and they turned their heads up. Seeing that it was only a single person, they ignored him while the big brother wrinkled his brow and said, "Why are you still talking to them? Just bring them away, there will be often people passing by the main road. Do not touch the other men or horses, but kill them if they refuse to give the women up."

When old second and old third heard his orders, they straightened their senses and immediately got off their horses and reached out to kidnap Liu Yueyue and Liu Qing.

Seeing the bad people about to touch his sister-in-law, Zhang Xiaohua immediately went up to the front to block their way. Old third of the Xicui mountain grabbed Zhang Xiaohua's neck and threw him over to the side of the road before he took Liu Qing's hands and dragged her up the horse.

Zhang Xiaolong tried to hold on to Liu Qing's other hand, but how could he

compete in strength with the old third of the Xicui mountain? Thus, he watched on helplessly as Liu Qing slipped off from his grip, and when her hand fell uselessly on his chest, it struck a hard object. Suddenly, Zhang Xiaolong's eyes brightened as if he remembered something, and he shouted, "Dear fellow heroes, I have a relative in the Piaomiao sect and a plaque here as evidence. Since we are all acquaintances in Jianghu, can you please give us some leeway?"

"Piaomiao sect?" The Xicui mountain people froze. Old second and old third both let go of the ladies' hands, and Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue scrambled back to Zhang Xiaolong's side, and the person who was riding on the road minding his own business happened to pass them and picked up the words "Piaomiao sect", which caused him to slow down his horse. However, the Xicui mountain people's attention was fully focused on Zhang Xiaolong and they did not notice the third party's actions.

The big brother of the Xicui mountain jumped off his horse and walked towards Zhang Xiaolong. He asked, "Where is the plaque? Show it to me."

Zhang Xiaolong hurriedly used his uninjured arm to take out the plaque from his breast and threw it over. The big brother of the Xicui mountain carefully caught it and when he observed the item, his face turned dark as he passed it to old second and old third, who also looked at the plaque with a serious expression on their faces before returning it to the big brother. The three men exchanged glances and their expressions turned cold; the big brother slipped the plaque into his breast and smiled viciously, "What is this dog-fart plaque, you even dare to pick up some firewood and call it a plaque? Do you know who the Piaomiao sect's people are? You even dare to say that you have relatives inside. Whatever, I was planning to spare you lives, but now I am going to send you to the underworld."

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua who already picked himself up walked over to his eldest brother side said biting, "So you all are planning to kill us to hide the evidence?"

Old third of the Xicui mountain smiled viciously as he said, "We are nowhere close to Piaomiao sect, so even if you die under our hands, who would find out about us? You can just prepare to die right now."

After he finished his sentence, he waved his hands pulled Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue over with old second of the Xicui mountain, while the other four men brandished their weapons and walked closer towards them.

Right at this critical moment, a voice travelled from their backs, “Who says that Piaomiao sect is nowhere close to you? The phrase ‘further than the edges from the sky and right in front of your eyes’ is very suitable to describe your current situation now.”

The people from Xicui mountain turned their heads, and it was indeed the man who was riding from afar whom they thought have left long ago, yet was unexpectedly still beside them.

On seeing his tall stature, handsome appearance and grey attire, as well as the precious sword that was hanging on his waist, the big brother of the Xicui mountain hurriedly went up to greet, “These people here are the three wolves of Xicui mountain, may I know how to address you?”

That person smiled as he returned the greeting, “This person is Piaomiao sect’s Lu Yueming. I overheard that there are some relatives of a fellow sect member here, so I came over especially to see the evidence. Where is the plaque, I would like to inspect it.”

The big brother of the Xicui mountain replied, “Hero Lu has made a mistake, how could there be a relative of a fellow sect member from your distinguished sect here? I have just confiscated a counterfeit plaque from them, there is no need for this hero to see it.”

Lu Yueming maintained his smile as he insisted, “Whether or not it is real or fake should be decided by someone from our Piaomiao sect. If you let me take a look, I will ignore what I see here today as long as the plaque is not genuine.”

Chapter 55: Murder

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Murder

Seeing that the other was so persistent, the big brother of Xicui mountain smiled as he replied, “No problem, hero Lu. I will show it to you now.” After he finished his sentence, he fished around his breast for a short while before taking the plaque out and carefully handing it over to Lu Yueming.

Lu Yueming stared at the big brother of Xicui mountain’s motions wordlessly, and when he extended his hand to receive the plaque, the other party countenance suddenly changed. Xicui Lao Da did not withdraw his hand after passing the plaque over, instead, he thrust his hand forward and a dagger appeared in his hands. Under the bright sunlight, the dagger emitted an eerie blue glow which anyone could tell that it contained a deadly poison. The dagger was not aimed at any particular vulnerable area, such as the throat or chest, it seemed that the big brother of Xicui was very confident in the poison efficacy; he was not unconcerned of where the poison is inflicted as long as it entered through any open wound.

Although one can hope high, and the distance between the men was very close, the Piaomiao disciple was simply on a different level compared to the Xicui mountain’s bandits. On facing the sneak attack, Lu Yueming flicked his wrist as he used the plaque in his hands to strike his opponent’s pulse. The big brother of Xicui mountain felt his wrist became numb and the dagger was dropped off his hands. However, Lu Yueming did not just end his counterattack there; he used the front side of the plaque to lever against the dagger causing it to shoot like an arrow back towards the big brother of Xicui. The speed was so fast that latter had no time to react, and with a ‘po’ sound, the dagger struck into his forehead, while an expression of disbelief appeared on his face as he collapsed onto the

ground. The site of the wound was immediately tainted black and the color spread rapidly throughout the face and then towards his body. However, the big brother of Xicui mountain was already motionless and it was evident that he could no longer feel anything anymore.

Lu Yueming saw the potency of the poison and a shiver crossed his spine. At the same time, the other two Xicui mountain wolves retrieved their weapons from their horse and upon seeing their big brother killed, their sadness turned into fury as they rushed forward while hollering the men at their side. Lu Yueming was calm when he saw the oncoming attack; he charged his agility skill and glanced back and forth at the four hesitant men. These four men were originally the big brother's bodyguards and were used to following his orders; now that their boss was killed and the opponent was obviously more powerful than them, they naturally wanted to retreat. However, their second and third boss was still alive, and under their beckoning to charge forward, the four men could not help but hesitate.

Lu Yueming saw that the four bodyguards had no intentions of retaliating immediately, and his heart jumped in joy because although the seven did not pose a threat to him with his level of martial skill, he was still wary of other sneak attacks. Thus, he did not wait any longer as he unsheathed the precious sword on his waist and displayed the Piaomiao seven swords which he had trained with difficulty, attempting to defeat the two opponents in the shortest time possible. The Piaomiao techniques were extraordinary as a few strokes could easily subdue the two Xicui mountain wolves until they could not counterattack. The two wolves of Xicui mountain saw that their backup did not come, and they cried angrily, "Are you still not taking any action? Or do you want to go back and get punished by our rules?"

When the four men heard the threat of punishment under their rules, they unwillingly took out their weapons and charged forward. At that moment, Lu Yueming smiled and said, "You are already too late." Then, he swiped his sword and cut through the blade which belonged to the second brother of Xicui mountain and went straight towards the latter's throat. By the time the second brother of Xicui mountain realized that his defense was broken through, Lu Yueming's sword tip had already withdrawn leaving behind a small red spot on

its mark. A stunned expression remained on his face as his body slumped onto the ground.

The third brother of Xicui mountain realized that he could not overcome the opponent so he turned around to flee without hesitation. However, how would Lu Yueming let him escape? Displaying the Piaomiao steps, he appeared like a shadow behind the frightened man and thrust his sword into his heart from the back. The thrust was not very deep but accurate and the old third of Xicui mountain let out a yelp before tumbling onto the ground. Lu Yueming looked at the bloodstain on his sword and he shook his head in dismay.

The four bodyguards had not wanted to participate in the fight since the beginning, and seeing the three wolves of Xicui mountain fall under Liu Yueming's hands, they immediately threw their weapons aside, kneeled on the ground and kowtowed profusely while crying, "Great hero, please spare our lives."

Lu Yueming threw a glance at the four kneeling men before ignoring them and walking straight towards Zhang Xiaolong and the others. Then, he took out the plaque and inspected it carefully. His brows wrinkled and he asked, "Which of you is junior sister Xue's relative?"

Zhang Xiaolong looked at Lu Yueming and replied with great difficulty, "I am sorry hero Lu, none of us are relatives with heroine Xue."

The wrinkles on Lu Yueming's brows became deeper and he said coldly, "Then where did you get this plaque from?"

Zhang Xiaohua saw that his eldest brother had difficulties speaking, while Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue were tongue-tied from the shock, so he immediately answered, "Hero Lu, it was like this." Then, he recounted the events in Lu town on the New Year day.

Lu Yueming listened to the end and then smiled when Zhang Xiaohua finished his tale, before asking, "Then have you met junior sister Xue before?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "We did meet heroine Xue, but she was wearing a veil the entire time so we did not get to see her real appearance, and we did not know that her surname is Xue."

Lu Yueming nodded more vigorously in understanding, he knew that Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing had passed by town Lu but he was not aware of the events regarding Zhang Xiaolong and the other people. However, Zhang Xiaohua's recount was believable, and even though Piaomiao sect had strict regulations regarding their plaques, Xue Qing was obviously being thorough when she chose to leave hers behind. To have chanced upon these people and even saved them again, Lu Yueming smiled as he imagined himself informing his junior sister, and perhaps even gaining her favor.

When he thought up to here, Lu Yueming walked to the front and studied Zhang Xiaolong's injuries, and first went to connect his dislocated arm before taking out a few pills from his breast to let Zhang Xiaolong consume them. The pitiable Zhang Xiaolong had suffered full body injuries in his previous attempt to rescue Li Qing, and even before he could bring Liu Qing back home as his bride he suffered another round of injuries that were more grievous than the first time. Even though he did not fracture any bones, the internal injuries he incurred from the kick on his chest was not light and there was no way he could recover in less than half a year. Of course, Lu Yueming was unaware of the spring water, and instead, he advised Zhang Xiaolong to recuperate well during the next six months.

After tending to Zhang Xiaolong's injuries, Lu Yueming turned towards the four bodyguards who were still kneeling and hesitated as if thinking of how to deal with them. The four men knew that their lives depend on that critical moment, and they immediately resumed their kowtowing. Seeing the blood dribbling from their foreheads, Zhang Xiaohua cringed uncomfortably from the side.

Lu Yueming seemed to have noticed the uneasy look on Zhang Xiaohua's expression and he asked smilingly, "Xiaohua, how do you think they should be dealt with?"

Seeing that hero Lu has asked him, Zhang Xiaohua shifted uncomfortable as he replied softly, "Since they did not hurt us or any other people, why don't we let them off?"

Lu Yueming looked at Zhang Xiaohua with seemingly great interest as he continued to ask, "Do you feel pity for them because of the blood on their foreheads?"

Zhang Xiaohua flushed as he said, "Of course, they really look pitiful and sincere."

Lu Yueming kept back his smile and said seriously, "Xiaohua-ah, you have to remember that even pitiful people can be vicious. They did not hurt anyone just now not because they were unwilling, but rather their master did not order them too. Furthermore, we are on the main road and killing an innocent would have consequences that they were not willing to bear. Imagine right now if the one who was killed was me and not their master, would you still feel that they are pitiful? Do you think that they will spare your lives?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded thoughtfully.

Lu Yueming asked again, "Do you know what it means to eradicate evil to protect civilians? It means that to eradicate evil, you must pull out the root and not leave a blade of grass behind. If we let them off today, there is no guarantee that they will not look for you in the future for revenge, and it will be too late to cry then."

When the four men heard Lu Yueming lecture Zhang Xiaohua, they raised their heads and exchanged glances before fleeing in different directions without any hint of their previous regret. Lu Yueming smiled slightly as he looked at Zhang Xiaohua's astonished expression. Then, as though he had already prepared for the scenario, Lu Yueming picked up the blades from two of the dead wolves of Xicui mountain and threw them towards the escapees. The blade spun with colors like a rainbow before striking squarely into their targets. At the same moment when he threw the blade, Lu Yueming activated his qinggong and appeared behind the third escapee's back. With a flash of his sword, he pierced straight through the chest and did not bother to look at the last escapee while he pulled out his sword. The last escapee's qinggong was quite good and he had managed to create a distance of several ten zhang before Lu Yueming could pay him any attention. Lu Yueming took a deep breath and he quickened his pace; his figure glided forward but the last escapee seemed to have noticed and threw back a hidden weapon towards his pursuer. Lu Yueming did not dare to confront the weapon and he kicked off the ground and flipped into the air narrowly missing the hidden weapon before slashing his precious sword onto the last escapee's head.

Although the confrontation took place at a distance from Zhang Xiaolong and the others, Zhang Xiaohua could see everything clearly up to when the sword landed on the bodyguard's head.

After Lu Yueming killed the last bodyguard, he immediately returned towards his original position and look at Zhang Xiaohua's dazed look. Then, he shook his head and wiped the bloodstained precious swords onto the clothes of a corpse before sheathing it back.

Lu Yueming walked towards the equally dazed Zhang Xiaolong and handed back the Piaomiao sect plaque as he said, "You all should continue to keep this safely, who knows if it can be useful to you again."

Chapter 56: Bad news

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Bad news

Zhang Xiaolong hurriedly kept the thing which had just saved his family into his breast. Lu Yueming did not wait for Zhang Xiaolong to reply as he instructed the party, “The four of you should ride your own horses and return quickly, do not touch the things of these bandits, and leave the bodies and horses at their original positions. I have heard that Xicui mountain has three heads, and it seems that I have just killed them all, I believe that the foxes will leave now that the trees have fallen, so you do not have to worry about any revenge. You do not need to hide that the fact that I saved you, but do not mention my name or the Piaomiao sect, understood?”

Zhang Xiaolong was quite confused but he nodded deeply in respect. Then, the four of them rode on the same horse as they returned back to Guo village.

Lu Yueming also jumped on his horse and just as he was about to leave, he looked at the mess by the road and wrinkled his brow. Then, he jumped off his horse and threw the seven corpse onto a horse each and freed the horses to let them roam before getting back on his own and continuing his journey. Thus, the road returned to its former peaceful state.

After a meal worth of time, the people who had hidden themselves nearby crept back out, and seeing that the bandits have left, they picked up the sedan and respective times. Having thought that the bride and groom have been kidnapped, they prayed fervently for their sake while feeling grateful for their own fortune and returned slowly back to Guo village.

After Zhang Xiaolong and the procession left Guo village to pick up the bride, the people who were left in the Zhang household had their hands tied as they

hosted their neighbors and prepared the presents as required by custom. Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei were running about without rest, their mouths were talking nonstop, and their eyes were looking back and forth as if they were afraid to have missed something out.

After three poles in the morning, the couple finally sighed in relief and sat down exhausted, thinking in their heads how did the rich households managed to do such a larger scale wedding when they were already so dead beaten. However, it never crossed their minds that rich households had their own attendants so why would they have to move their own hands? After everything was tidied up and all the tasks were done, the sun had risen to the highest point in the sky and the couple walked over the chef where they filled their stomachs.

After a short rest, the time for the procession to return has arrived, so Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei went into the grandmother's room. The grandmother had woken up early that day, and Guo Sufei had already prepared a new set of clothes for her a few days ago. When the grandmother heard her enter the room, she asked, "Sufei? Xiaolong and the rest have returned, right?"

Guo Sufei smiled brightly as she replied, "Mother, not yet. The time has not arrived yet, and you can follow us into the main room to wait there instead."

The grandmother was naturally elated, and she agreed happily.

The couple carefully supported the grandmother into the main room and onto a chair in the middle of the room. The grandmother's body was already very weak by then and she would usually be resting on her bed. Zhang Xiaolong's wedding would require the parents and elder's participation, and the grandmother had gathered all her spirits just for this day so that she could receive the bows from her grandson and granddaughter-in-law, thereby fulfilling her last wish.

However, as time passed, the sounds of the firecrackers and music did not appear despite the auspicious hour having arrived. The village was very particular about their wedding customs, missing the auspicious hour would mean that the couple would not have a happy life ahead. Thus, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei began to worry, and even the grandmother began to show signs of collapsing.

Right at that moment, a person suddenly shouted, "Look, that is Liu Er who

was playing the trumpet, why did he come back alone?"

Indeed, over the short walls that surrounded the Zhang courtyard was a man running anxiously towards them who was also part of the bridal procession!

Zhang Cai had a bad premonition and he immediately rushed out of the house. Even before he stepped into the courtyard, he heard from the hoarse voice of Liu Er, "This is not good, Xiaolong and his bride has met with the Xicui mountain bandits!"

These words were like a spoon of water dripping into a pan of hot oil, the Zhang courtyard exploded into an uproar, while some of the less brave people disappeared into smoke. Almost everyone was discussing frantically, some had faces of joy from reveling in another's sorrow, and others had faces of sympathy.

Before Zhang Cai could rush to the courtyard entrance, he heard a wail from behind, "Mother....."

A pin seemed to fall from Zhang Cai's heart as he immediately turned back. Indeed, in the main hall, he saw the grandmother whose face was green like rust lying on the floor in an unconscious state. Guo Sufei was at a side crying while her hands were busy on her mother's body, massaging her chest. Zhang Cai rushed forward and pat on the grandmother's back continuously, and after a while, the grandmother's throat jerked and spat out a mouth of thick phlegm followed by fresh blood. Then, the grandmother let out a weak cry, "Xiaolong-ah....."

Guo Sufei could not even worry about Zhang Xiaolong at that time, she cried as Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohu helped her carry her mother back into the room. Then, the couple exchanged glances as they wondered how could a joyous occasion suddenly turn into something so devastating?

The couple looked at the pale faced grandmother as they felt knives stabbing into their heart. Zhang Xiaolong and the rest over there were in a life or death situation while the mother in their house was about to pass away, what should they do at that time?

Zhang Cai left Guo Sufei to look after the grandmother as he and Zhang Xiaohu returned to the main room. A portion of the people in the courtyard had left, while many of them had entered the main room to listen to Liu Er's account.

When Liu Er saw Zhang Cai enter the room again, he told his story from the beginning. This Liu Er was quite eloquent, he was able to vividly paint the image of Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua's triumphs in shooting with the bow and passing the bride's questions, and he even remembered every single word in Zhang Xiaolong's self-composed 'poem'. The audience praised that Zhang Cai has produced two good sons, but they also expressed their sympathies as these children were not likely to live past the accident. Zhang Cai was even more heartbroken when he heard the story and was anxious to learn the ending, but Liu Er's description was so detailed that the former wanted to rip his mouth to pull the last words out.

When Liu Er said up to, "... and the four fierce bandits brandished their weapons around to chase us away.", he stopped talking which made everyone ask anxiously, "And then?"

Liu Er replied innocently, "There is nothing else, I do not know what happened next. However, I thought of elder brother Zhang so I ran back to make my report."

Zhang Cai felt as if he was holding onto the last glimmer of hope as he asked, "So you did not see how the mountain bandits deal with Xiaolong and the rest?"

Liu Er replied, "Nope, the mountain bandits had chased us away by then. Xiaolong, Xiaohua and the two ladies in the sedan were left there."

Zhang Cai's heart felt some hope as he said, "Perhaps Xiaolong and the rest are still alive."

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement, but their thoughts were all alike. Since the mountain bandits had forced them to stay, the likelihood of them living is low, and even if they managed to survive, the innocent bride and bridesmaid would be entering the wolf's den. No matter what has been said, this wedding could no longer continue. Even though the Zhang household had treated people kind and sincerely in the past, the heavens have played a cruel joke on them that day.

After Zhang Xiaohu heard the story, he got up from his seat and said, "Father, I will go over now to see what has happened to eldest brother and third brother." After he finished his sentence, he started to walk towards the door while Zhang

Cai remained silent, but the crowd immediately held him back and persuaded, “Second son, you are the only man of the house now so you can’t play the hero so casually. Wait awhile as we gather all the young men in our village and our weapons, then we can go together.”

Thus, the people in the courtyard rushed out and starting moving the village youths. Then, everyone carried their hoes in their hands as they prepared to leave the village and investigate the scene.

Just as they were about to leave, they saw a horse carrying four passengers galloping towards the village.

Some of the sharper-eyed people recognized the people on the horse and they shouted, “It is Zhang Xiaolong, Zhang Xiaohua-ah, they are alive and they have returned.....”

The crowd cheered as they rushed over.

When the crowd received Zhang Xiaolong and the rest, they noticed the tattered clothes and fresh blood stains on their bodies. A few men carefully supported Zhang Xiaolong down the horse, while Zhang Xiaohu carried Zhang Xiaohua as he looked painfully at the wound on the latter’s shoulder. Liu Qing and Liu Yueyue did not get off the horse, they were still shocked from their experience and were unable to walk. Someone took over the reins and led the horse onwards, while another person ran back to share the news with the Zhang household.

Even before the crowd crossed half the distance to the Zhang courtyard, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei who had received the news ran over and upon seeing their children and daughter-in-law still well and alive, they broke down into tears of relief. The couple gently checked on their sons’ injuries while they said gently, “Good, good.” By the time they reached the entrance of the courtyard, Guo Sufei seemed to snap out of her mood and she said emotionally “Xiaolong, Qingqing, come in quickly and look at your grandmother.”

Even though Liu Qing could not walk, Guo Sufei supported her down the horse and all the way into the grandmother’s room. The grandmother was semi-conscious by then, and when she heard that her grandson was still alive, and expression of joy appeared in her face. It was as if her glazed eyes could see her

beloved grandson and granddaughter-in-law, and she muttered, "Wedding ceremony, wedding ceremony."

Hearing her mother's words, Guo Sufei understood her intention. The village has a custom that disallows weddings and the celebration of any other joyous occasions after an elder's death, and the grandmother did not want to postpone Zhang Xiaolong's wedding any longer.

Hence, Guo Sufei clenched her teeth as she helped Zhang Cai prepare the wedding materials. And at that moment, the grandmother seemed to have regained some of her energy and insisted to go to the main room to receive the bows from her grandchildren.

Thus, Guo Sufei and Zhang Cai helplessly supported the grandmother into the main room.

Chapter 57: Celebrate? Mourn?

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Celebrate? Mourn?

Thus, Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing's wedding ceremony as conducted under these urgent circumstances.

The grandmother was sitting on a chair in the main room with a bright rosy smile on her face which only grew brighter when she received her grandchildren's bow. When the officiator of the wedding finally announced, "And now the couple can consummate their marriage", her rosy expression finally disappeared and she closed her eyes peacefully with the smile still remaining on her face.

Guo Sufei and Zhang Cai felt a shiver went up their hands, and Guo Sufei immediately cried out painfully, "Mother." This was the second time she shouted the two words 'mother' in the main room where the wedding was conducted, and it was also the last time she would ever get to call someone like that.

This time, Liu Qing ignored all the proprieties and customs and she directly removed her veil to help Guo Sufei and Zhang Cai carry the grandmother's body back into the room.

Everyone in the courtyard had blank expressions on their faces, not knowing if that day was a joyous occasion to celebrate or a solemn occasion to mourn. Only some people knew the situation wiped their tears secretly.

Zhang Xiaolong was supported by Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua into the same room where they saw the grandmother laying on the bed peacefully as though she was sleeping. This time, she was not affected by her illness and did not try to suppress her cough in fear of disturbing Zhang Xiaohua. Instead, she looked sound asleep with a smile of satisfaction on her face. Zhang Xiaohua has

already etched this final expression of his grandmother into his heart and he no longer felt any sadness, only emptiness in his heart. His mother's wretched sobbing echoed into his ears making him feel slightly guilty, why did he not feel sad when he obviously should? Or was his grandmother just resting?

No, definitely not. Zhang Xiaohua could no longer sense any of that unknown life energy left in his grandmother's body, he was sure that his grandmother has truly departed, and has left him for good.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at his mother who was sobbing uncontrollably, and then at his father and elder brothers, but tears did not appear in his eyes; his eyes did not even turn red.

The sobbing continued to echo within the grandmother's room for a long time, while the people in the courtyard had dispersed back to their own homes. When Zhang Cai composed his feelings and went back out to meet the fellow villagers still in the courtyard, he shook their hands apologetically and asked for their help to take down the celebratory decorations off the house and replace them with the white and black ones for mourning. Finally, the people from the procession who had 'escaped with their lives' came back and when they saw the new decorations in the Zhang household, they assumed that it was for Zhang Xiaolong and the rest. In sympathy, they changed out of their celebratory clothes into more suitable garbs, ate and drank some refreshment, and started to play the funeral song.

At that moment, the Zhang household had already changed into their funeral garbs, and because Zhang Xiaolong was seriously injured, he was bedridden again. The pitiable Liu Qing had to exchange her bridal down for the funeral garb and even wash and dress the grandmother's body immediately after she entered the Zhang household.

Zhang Cai felt guilty when he saw his busy daughter-in-law. He was orphaned since young and never experienced any parental love before entering the Guo village where Guo Sufei's parents treated him as though he was their own. Now that he has sent them away, his heart felt like they were pierced with a thousand needles, and as he recalled the scraps and details of his life in this courtyard, tears began to flow down from his eyes reflexively again. Zhang Xiaolong had the fortune of marrying Liu Qing, and he hoped not bring them too much trouble

when it was his own time to leave.

The coffin and clothes were already prepared beforehand. Zhang Cai, Zhang Xiaohu and Guo Sufei placed the grandmother's body into the coffin, and they sought for help to move the coffin into the main room. The main room was not big so there was not much space left after the coffin was placed there. Following the village customs, the coffin has to be displayed in the main room for seven days where relatives and friends could come to pay their final respects, and only after then could they cover the coffin and bury it into the ground.

A funeral's proceedings were not as complicated as a wedding's preparation. Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei went over to the village elder to request for help; the elder in the Guo village was also an old person so he could sympathize easily with them and thus readily sent over some men to help. Hence, the funeral proceeded smoothly.

During nightfall, the sounds of people gradually faded off, and the swaying oil lamp in the main room created a long moving shadow on the coffin. Zhang Xiaohua and the others were kneeling on the little space left in the main room, and Guo Sufei was crying continuously; most of her strength was already exhausted. Liu Qing was kneeling beside Guo Sufei as she supported her while wiping off her own tears. Even though the grandmother had not many interactions with her, she would always smile kindly towards her every time they met, which made Liu Qing feel the warmth of unconditional love. Even though she had mentally prepared herself for this day, her death occurred too suddenly and on her wedding day. When she thought of her own short wedding, Liu Qing could not bring herself to blame the kind old lady, and she wondered if it was fate that was playing a joke on her? Liu Qing could see the apologetic look on Zhang Cai's face, and it reminded her of the Zhang household's warm and familiar atmosphere. However, her first day as a member of the Zhang household had turned out like so which made her wonder if it as a premonition or warning for the future.

Actually, looking at the painful appearance of Guo Sufei and thinking back to the grandmother, she thought that the latter has lived a long and fulfilled surrounded by her grandchildren and in a harmonious family. Liu Qing wondered if she could have such fulfilling life and be surrounded by such happiness in her

old age.

While Liu Qing's thoughts were wandering about, Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts were continuously cycling around in motion. Zhang Xiaohua knelt in the shadow at a corner and his gaze was fixed upon the coffin as he thought to himself, "Is this the conclusion of grandmother's life?" After the people in the house recounted the events which led to his grandmother's collapse, Zhang Xiaohua was constantly imagining what would have happened if he knew martial arts and could bring his eldest brother and the others away when the bandits struck. Perhaps his eldest brother and his sister-in-law could reach home safely, and the grandmother would not have passed away so soon, and she would be enjoying the scene of his eldest brother's wedding, and may even get to witness the birth of her first great grandchild.

Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts became wild as he thought what if this, what if that, and all the scenarios assumed that he knew martial arts and had some ability to protect his loved ones. However, did he have such power?

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua made the first decision for himself in his life, which was to learn martial arts.

However, where could he begin from?

His head was still a mass of fog, but at least the final goal was in sight.

If it comes to learning martial arts, the first thing that Zhang Xiaohua thought of was "Piaomiao". From Wen Wenhai, Xue Qing to Lu Yueming, every one of them had left a deep impression on him. That ability to be in full control of the situation, the power to punish the evil; all these were like stars in Zhang Xiaohua's eyes, and when put together with the plaque which would even make someone freeze and hand out two hundred silvers immediately without complaints, all these were an irresistible dream to a boy who lived in the villages like Zhang Xiaohua. Perhaps this was how a man should live, and not always rely on a plaque to call for external aid when a disaster befell on him and his loved ones. When he thought that the lives of his entire family rested on that little plaque, Zhang Xiaohua felt a multitude of emotions and as he continued to think, his eyes slowly shut and he unwittingly entered the dream of seemingly breathing bright lights.

Coincidentally, it was midnight then.

After he finished settling the matters that had to be settled and sent all the helpers off, Zhang Cai dragged his exhausted body back into the main room where his wife was still crying until her voice turned hoarse. Just when he entered the room to comfort his wife, he noticed Zhang Xiaohua sleeping at a corner in the dark and his heart softened. While he was busy handling the funeral matters, he had forgotten about his youngest son.

Zhang Xiaolong was injured and he had fallen asleep earlier on the bed. However, this other son of his was also injured, the lash mark on his shoulder was extremely severe, not to mention his young age. Because the wound was hidden under a fresh change of clothes, it slipped off Zhang Cai's notice which made him feel guilty, so he tried to carry Zhang Xiaohua carefully onto the bed. However, he could not lift the boy up no matter how hard he tried, and that was when he realized that his son has grown up and he has grown old. Hence, he signaled to Zhang Xiaohu who was kneeling on the other side of the room, and with the latter's help, they lifted Zhang Xiaohua back onto his bed. Just as they were about to leave the main room, Guo Sufei wiped her tears away and said, "Bring Xiaohua into Xiaolong's room. If not, he will think of his grandmother when he wakes up in the middle of the night."

A mother's love is just this meticulous; even though Guo Sufei was still affected by her recently deceased mother, she would still think about her own children. Zhang Xiaohu replied, "Mother, it is fine. Xiaohua will not wake up even if we pour water on him."

Guo Sufei replied, "That is still not fine. He is still young and will be afraid if he wakes up. Do as I say."

Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohu put Zhang Xiaohua down onto the side of the bed where Zhang Xiaolong was sleeping, while Guo Sufei washed her face took the oil lamp into the room before removing Zhang Xiaohua's clothes to look at the wound. The lash wound was on Xiaohua's shoulders, and when Guo Sufei looked at Xiaohua's face which still carried a hint of adolescences, she broke down into tears again. Her son had suffered such a serious injury yet he did not complain and immediately went to change his clothes to pay his respect to his grandmother, and went to sleep without having any dinner. As a mother, she

had forgotten all about his experience in the day and left him at the back of her mind, yet her son did not say anything and quietly accompanied her in the main room. Now, all she could do is let him rest well.

Guo Sufei walked out of the room and instructed Zhang Xiaohu and Liu Qing to return to their respective rooms while Zhang Cai and she stayed in the main room to accompany the grandmother. Zhang Xiaohu and Liu Qing initially refused, but Guo Sufei insisted on her own stand and they went back to their respective rooms. Zhang Xiaohu went into the room where Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohua were sleeping so he could look after his two injured brothers.

Liu Qing fell into a deep sleep the moment she laid on the bed, the events of the day were too strenuous for her.

Chapter 58: Hiccup

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Hiccup

The morning of that day, the sun rose and a group of people could be seen quietly waiting in front of a lush jujube forest on the middle finger mountain of five claw peak.

One of the people was naturally Sir Yanming who was dressed in green from head to toe.

There were three young men behind him, of which one was Lu Yueming who saved Zhang Xiaolong and the others on the main road. Currently, Lu Yueming did not have the look of superiority from yesterday on his face, he was standing behind politely with his hands at his sides and his eyes on Sir Yanming as he waited quietly.

They were at the same area where the previous expedition party entered the secret area from and the same shadow appeared, Sir Yanming activated his qinggong and jumped over to make a mark on the two jujube trees. However, apart from the mark he just made, there were no signs of other markings on the tree. Where was the mark he made the previous time? Sir Yanming pondered, the three cun deep marking could not have disappeared within a month, had he gotten the wrong pair of trees?

He felt as though a rock just dropped onto his heart as he thought, "Not good, if that was not original entrance, we may face some trouble when we enter later." He walked over to the surrounding jujube trees but came up with nothing, there were no trees nearby with a mark on its trunk. At that moment, a short and bulky man who was wearing beige walked up to the front and asked, "Senior uncle Yanming, what is the problem?"

Sir Yanming turned his head, and it was Tan family's Tan Feng who spoke. Sir Yanming could not help but smile, the Tan family members were all short and stout which made people feel secure, and it was truly a case of 'if one is not a family member, he will not be able to pass off as one'. Sir Yanming maintained his smile as he explained the problem to Tan Feng who immediately responded "That's easy." Then, the latter turned towards a thin scholarly looking youth who was wearing long white robes and said, "Brother Zhang, why don't we go this way and see if we can find any trees with a sword marking around? Brother Lu, can you do the same and follow Senior uncle Yanming?"

The scholar was thousand swords peak's Zhang Zhaoyang, whose face was skinny and eyes looked strict, and was a man of few words. With a single-word reply, "Okay", he turned around and walked in the said direction while Tan Feng followed behind. Lu Yueming continued to smile at Sir Yanming as he waited for the elder to give him instructions. Senior uncle Yanming signaled him to come over without saying anything unnecessary and also turned to a different direction to look for the markings, while Lu Yueming caught up anxiously and then followed behind.

Sir Yanming only took a few steps before he slowed down, he was certain that the marking was nearby and walking any further ahead would be wasted effort. After all, was there a need to circle the entire jujube forest? Lu Yueming who was following behind understood the elder's intention, and he asked, "Senior uncle Yanming, is this where you made the marking the previous time?" Sir Yanming stopped in his footsteps and turned around to reply, "Yes, I do not see any point in walking further ahead."

Lu Yueming continued, "Would it be okay if senior uncle Yanming stay here to search while this junior go ahead to check in case?"

Sir Yanming smiled and said, "Piaomiao sect is truly becoming more outstanding after each generation, this sect master Ou is so fortunate to have all the exemplary disciples recruited into his sect. Alright, you can go ahead, but remember to look carefully."

Lu Yueming maintained his smile as he nodded and continued to walk further into the distance.

Hence, Sir Yanming remained at his original spot as he pondered on how to proceed from there, while the other three men walked to the boundaries and back. As Sir Yanming had expected, their efforts were fruitless, and everyone became depressed. The result of the previous discussion was to use the original entrance to enter the secret area, but now that the entrance could not be found, their plans had to be amended.

The three men stood there quietly, pondering deeply while they waited for further instructions from Sir Yanming.

Like the previous expedition, these three men were all second generation disciples from their respective factions, except that the trip this time was conducted more secretly; when their faction leaders disseminated their orders, several disciples were sent to different locations to mislead any spies that were monitoring their behaviors. These three disciples themselves were only told of their mission before they left the sect, and were instructed not to share any of the details with their fellow disciples. Hence, even their own sects were confused of the sudden exodus of several of their disciples, and the three selected disciples could successfully reach their destination without other sects picking up on their trail.

The disciples who were sent out were all trustworthy in their own rights, since the four factions would not let down their guard after learning of the importance of the secret area. Furthermore, these three disciples have consumed the pills that their respective factions have concocted using the rare herbs from the secret area, so their martial prowess would be significant even among the whole of Jianghu. Otherwise, how could Lu Yueming single-handedly dispatch off those seven men from Xicui mountain with such ease? Even the Wen Wenhai and Xue Qing a month ago would not be able to do so that easily.

Even though an obstacle had appeared in their mission, the three men had calm and rational personalities. Even Tan Feng who appeared rough and crude was assessing the situation calmly while waiting for further instructions from Sir Yanming.

Sir Yanming pondered for a good while before he said, "Since we cannot use the same entrance from before, the route we take will not be completely safe, and we cannot follow the same directions as before to enter. All of you should

take out the leather parchment, I believe that you have been informed on how to use it, so let's check if the directions are still unchanged."

Upon hearing, the three men took out the parchment as instructed, and they used their blades to cut their finger and drip the blood onto the parchment. What happened then made everyone, Sir Yanming included, stunned.

The place where the direction should appear was completely blank.

While the newcomers were not as affected, Sir Yanming broke out into a cold sweat when he saw the blank result. Even though he had experienced a huge leap in his martial skill and had prepared several items for the trip, he felt a sense of foreboding creeping from all sides of his surroundings as he turned to look around.

Sir Yanming had initially made his mind to enter the secret at no matter the cost, but after these obstacles, he was unwilling to enter no matter what. Having roamed the Jianghu for so long, he had seen all matters of things but this was the first time he saw words that disappear on a parchment, he was already out of his depths. The cautious and timid him has judged this situation to be a ticking bomb, and had decided to not try his luck and wait for the fifteenth of next February.

However, he did not reveal his fear on the outside and said casually, "Since the directions do not appear, then there can only be two reasons. The first reason is that this time is the same as the previous time. The second possible reason is that the time is not ripe, so the instructions do not appear." Even though these were his words, he did not believe himself. If there is no change from the previous time, then the directions should still appear like before. And for the second reason, it was even more ludicrous because who had ever heard of words that will only appear at certain timings?

In short, no matter what the reason was, Si Yanming had already made his final decision and he shared, "Since we do not have the directions, and I cannot ensure that the previous directions are still effective, I suggest that we end this trip here. What do you all think?"

Even though these three men before Sir Yanming could not match the latter in martial skill or seniority, they were still representatives from their own factions

so Sir Yanming wanted to listen to their opinions.

Lu Yueming pondered but remained silent. His sect master had already instructed that the Piaomiao sect has already sufficient strength, so there was no need for him to persist and enter the secret area. Even though the rewards that can be harvested are important, the sect's main priority was to expand the influence of the sect, and entering the secret area sooner before a year was up was not as important as keeping its existence a secret. Hence, seeing that Sir Yanming had the same thoughts as him, he did not speak up.

Tan family's Tan Feng wrinkled his brow, his clan master had also informed him to prioritize his own safety and the secret of the area's existence. Even though he was curious about the secret area and had wanted to see the hundred years old rare herbs, he replied, "My clan master has already instructed me to follow Sir Yanming's arrangement, so I do not have any objections."

Sir Yanming nodded his head and turned to look at Lu Yueming who naturally agreed as well. Finally, he turned his gaze towards thousand swords peak' Zhang Zhaoyang.

Zhang Zhaoyang did not have a worried expression unlike Tan Feng, his features were smooth as he gazed towards the jujube forest as though it was a playground. He seemed to have already made a decision and was only looking to hear the other opinions, and upon seeing that Sir Yanming was enquiring on his opinion, he smiled and said, "Senior uncle Yanming, my sect master has instructed me to take back some herbs no matter how grave the danger is. I think that I will have to explore this jujube forest no matter what."

Everyone had thought that he would agree with the majority's decision but Zhang Zhaoyang's words were at odds with the rest. However, as Sir Yanming thought back to the discussion on Wutong mountain, he remembered that Wan Chengjiu was the most enthusiastic person for this mission so this turn of event was not out of his expectations.

However, how could they allow Zhang Zhaoyang enter the jujube forest alone when the other three parties were unwilling to enter? Sir Yanming could not find a solution even after he pondered for half a bell of time.

Seeing that Sir Yanming was silent, Zhang Zhaoyang could understand the

former's dilemma so he said, "Senior uncle Yanming, fellow brothers, I have already made some preparations to enter the forest so it should not be too dangerous for me. If everyone is unwilling to enter with me, then I will go alone and help everyone scout the road. What do you all think?"

The last sentence was directed towards Sir Yanming when it was said.

Chapter 59: Slip-up

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Slip-up

When Sir Yanming heard Zhang Zhaoyang's reply, he knew that the latter had already made his mind so he said towards the other two, "I am prepared to stay here. What about the both of you?"

Lu Yueming exchanged glances with Tan Feng and replied, "Both of us will not enter either, I wish you safe on your venture."

Sir Yanming nodded and said to Zhang Zhaoyang, "Then you can go ahead, I guess that you already know the directions."

Zhang Zhaoyang smiled as he replied, "Walk straight past ten trees, right past eight trees, back past six trees and left past six trees. I have already committed it to memory, are they accurate?"

Sir Yanming said, "You are right, those are it. I can see that thousand swords peak sect master is pretty determined this time."

His words contained two meanings behind them but Zhang Zhaoyang was unperturbed. Instead, he searched his body and took out a coil of white rope from his knapsack which made Sir Yanming's eyes brightened as the latter asked, "Junior nephew Zhang, is this rope woven from the silk of the snow silkworm?"

Zhang Zhaoyang nodded his head in praised and replied, "Senior uncle Yanming sure has good sight, this is indeed made from the silk that is produced by the snow silkworms which can only be found in the frozen northern lands."

Sir Yanming continued to ask, "I have heard that this silk is unordinary, even a normal blade will not be able to cut through it. Is this rumor true?"

Zhang Zhaoyang said, "It is just as you say, would senior uncle like to test it?"

Sir Yanming pondered before answering, "It would be better if I do for the sake of junior nephew Zhang's safety." After finishing his sentence, he took out the sharp dagger from before and said "This dagger of mine can cut through metal as though it is mud, would the silk rope be able to handle its sharpness?" Zhang Zhaoyang smiled as he said, "Senior uncle Yanming can go ahead. Our sect master had already tested it personally when he first received it. Apart from the peak protecting sword which we did not use, all the other swords in our thousand swords peak was unable to leave a scratch on its surface."

After hearing his reply, Sir Yanming lifted his dagger and cut it down onto the snow white silk rope, and there was indeed no mark left behind. Sir Yanming shook his head and said, "Sect master Wan has planned very well, he cannot bear to risk his child yet he could not contain the wolf, and is thus willing to bring out such a treasure to accommodate both goals. Good plan, good plan."

Zhang Zhaoyang did not continue the conversation; he picked the silk rope from the ground and tied it to the jujube tree which Sir Yanming had just made a marking on. Then, he strung the other end onto his waist, and said to Sir Yanming, "Senior uncle Yanming, this snow silk has another use, which is to transmit the vibrations from our internal energy. May I request for senior uncle Yanming to wait here, and send vibrational signals to me in regular time periods when this later generation disciple enter the forest. I will reply with a signal to show that I am safe, and when I have reached the secret area, I will send four consecutive signals to you. Should the rest of you wish to follow me in, you can just trail the silk rope then. Is that alright?"

Sir Yanming smiled and replied, "Sure, then we will have to count on junior nephew as we wait for your success."

Zhang Zhaoyang took out the thousand swords peak's leather parchment and handed it over to Sir Yanming. He said, "Senior uncle Yanming, if I met with some unfortunate encounter in the forest, please return this to my sect master."

Sir Yanming was surprised, he wrinkled his brow and said, "This is such a precious item, how could your sect master hand it to me?"

Zhang Zhaoyang smiled as he replied, "Senior uncle Yanming has become sworn brothers with my sect master, so we would naturally not consider you as

an outsider.”

Sir Yanming tightened his grip on the silk rope and said, “Junior nephew can enter the forest with a peace of mind, I will return the parchment to you immediately after we enter the secret area.”

Zhao Zhaoyang said gratefully, “Thank you senior uncle, I will enter the forest now.”

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Zhaoyang took out his longsword and was about to step into the jujube forest.

Suddenly, Sir Yanming pulled him back and asked, “How long is this silk rope of yours? I remembered that the route was quite far, up to four or five li.”

Zhang Zhaoyang smiled and patted at his other knapsacks while saying, “This disciple here still has other preparations, and I will return immediately if they are insufficient.”

Sir Yanming looked at the pouches on the other man’s waist and smiled bitterly back while shaking his head as he thought, “This Wan Chengjiu is truly determined.”

Zhang Zhaoyang bade the others farewell again, and lifted his precious sword as he carefully stepped into the jujube forest.

Sir Yanming and the others could still observe his silhouette in the beginning, but his figure disappeared soon after, leaving behind only the snow white silk rope.

After the time it takes to boil a kettle of tea, there were no other movements that could be seen in the jujube forest, not even the sounds of birds or crickets. Sir Yanming walked upfront and used his hands to pull the silk rope while he sent his internal energy out, and not long after he felt the vibration of the other party’s response. Seeing that Zhang Zhaoyang was still safe, Sir Yanming’s heart became more reassured.

Sir Yanming returned the vibration while Lu Yueming and Tan Feng looked warmly at him while waiting for an update on Zhang Zhaoyang. Sir Yanming smiled as he nodded silently, he felt a strange type of pressure in this place which made the quiet him say even less words than usual.

After the time to boil another kettle of tea, Sir Yanming felt a sudden jump in his heart, and he thought that he imagined a shout coming from the forest. However, it was evident that the forest was dead quiet, and when he turned around to look at the other two people, he saw that Lu Yueming and Tan Feng had surprised looks on their faces as well. Thus, he immediately stepped forward and grabbed the silk rope to send a wave of internal energy over. However, there was no response after half a bell worth of time, and he sent another wave of vibrations again but there was still no reply from the other side. Sir Yanming pondered for a while before he started to pull on the rope to see if he could pull the person back out.

As expected, he could pull the rope back and it even felt light on the other end.

Sir Yanming was downcast as he pulled the silk rope, while Tan Feng went forward hurriedly to coil the silk rope that was piling up behind him. After he pulled the first open and was on to the second, Sir Yanming increased his speed and the pile of rope that Tan Fen was coiling behind him taller. Then, Sir Yanming heard rustling sounds which became faster as he increased his pulling speed, and he guessed that it should be the thing on the other end. This time, Sir Yanming chose to proceed more cautiously and he slowed down his pulling speed.

As the thing got closer and closer, everyone's guard went up.

Unexpectedly, there was nothing on the other side of the silk rope apart from a knot.

Sir Yanming wrinkled his brows and lifted the silk rope knot to inspect it more carefully. The silk roped looked like it was torn apart and not cut using a sharp edge, and Sir Yanming put it under his nose to take a few sniffs. It carried a scent of blood, and then Sir Yanming observed the silk rope again, he noticed a trace of blood. It seemed then Zhang Zhaoyang was involved in a violent struggle, and was pulled away without even leaving behind any items or clues. Sir Yanming sighed out in regret.

On the other side, Tan Feng had collected all the silk rope and had passed the entire dump of precious material to Sir Yanming. Lu Yueming was still holding his sword in his hands, and he asked, "Senior uncle Yanming, having come here twice, did you notice anything different this time round?"

Sir Yanming pondered and said regretfully, “No, I do not see any difference. Has junior nephew Lu made any discovery?”

Lu Yueming looked at the dense jujube forest and answered as though he had some thought in his head, “Senior uncle Yanming, I have grown up in the hills and even though I have never seen such a large jujube forest, I have been to other forests of similar size. After being here for some time, I kept feeling that there was something strange about this forest and after thinking for a long time, I noticed that there seems to be some fog that prevents sunlight from penetrating into the forest.”

Sir Yanming smiled as he said, “True, junior nephew is very detailed. The last time we entered, the insides of the forest was completely filled with fog so we could not see much further ahead of us. There was not much sunlight, and there were many skeletal remains of animals and humans as well.”

Lu Yueming nodded and said, “There will always be curious people and animals that will enter such dangerous places to never leave, so those remains are not unexpected to me. Apart from that, have you noticed any other strange characteristics of this forest?”

Sir Yanming and Tan Feng asked curiously, “What strange characteristic?”

Lu Yueming replied, “Listen, are there any sounds of birds in the forest?”

Sir Yanming and Tan Feng strained their ears, and indeed, there was no bird cries. Sir Yanming thought back to his previous trip and said, “Junior nephew is right, it was very quiet the last time I entered, and there were no bird sounds anywhere.”

Lu Yueming said solemnly, “This is the strange characteristic I have noticed. Birds are unlike other animals because they have wings and are able to go anywhere, and a forest should be the natural home of birds. Since there are no bird sounds in the forest, doesn’t senior uncle Yanming feel suspicious as well?”

After hearing the other party’s sentence, Sir Yanming realized his oversight and immediately went into deep thought. His whole body broke out into cold sweat, and his heart jumped again when he took another look at the blood stained silk rope. The scene of the deathly quiet forest made him not want to stay in that place any longer, he waved his hand and said, “Junior nephew, this is not a place

for the living. Let us depart now and find a better place to discuss this.”

Lu Yueming and Tan Feng immediately replied, “As senior uncle Yanming instructs.”

Without staying any further, Sir Yanming kept the precious silk rope which was made of silk produced by the snow silkworms into his own knapsack while he brought Lu Yueming and Tan Feng away without ever looking back.

The fog continued to roll in the quiet forest as though nothing has happened previously.

Chapter 60: Burial

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Burial

The three men sighed in relief after they returned to the thumb of the five claw peak by using their qinggong. Sir Yanming sat casually on the ox-sized stone and asked, "Junior nephew has not finished his explanation then so let's hear it now."

Lu Yueming said, "There are no birds in the forest so this later generation disciple has two conjectures. Firstly, there may be a beast in the forest which the birds fear so they dare not roost in nearby. As for what type of beast it was, I am at a loss for ideas myself. The second possibility is that this jujube forest is a formation which also has the properties of preventing birds from roosting inside."

Sir Yanming pondered and said, "Junior nephew's propositions are reasonable. However, the way of formations has been long lost in the Jianghu world, so I am unable to speculate on how likely for this to be the case. As for the conjecture of a beast, I think that it is too far-fetched for now. Either way, there are too many mysteries in this forest which are beyond my abilities to investigate so it is better for us to wait another year before we enter. To leave with our lives is already a good enough outcome that we should be satisfied with, our speculations can never win over heaven's decisions and we cannot force a claim on something that does not belong to us."

Up to this point, Sir Yanming's tone has become serious and it contrasted from the current mood of spring.

Lu Yueming and Tan Feng were the same, their hearts were in a mixture of fear and relief. Previously, Zhang Zhaoyang was so optimistic and positive that they

almost wanted to tag along with him into the forest. Fortunately, they resisted the temptation and looking back, their decisions had saved their lives. Their faction leaders had also issued a strict order to never let the four parchments fall into the same hand, which was why they had chosen not to enter the forest.

While the three men were in an introspective mood, Sir Yanming spoke up, “This expedition has come to an end here. Even though we did not succeed, and have even lost a disciple from the thousand swords peak, our goal has been satisfied so the two of you can return to your factions to report our findings. I will still have to pay the thousand swords sect a visit to provide an explanation to their sect master so both of you can go ahead first.”

Upon hearing Sir Yanming’s words, Lu Yueming and Tan Feng did not stay any longer, they bade their farewells and flew off in different directions.

Sir Yanming looked on as the figures of the two people slowly disappeared, not knowing if they would return directly to their own factions or to go about with their own matters. Whatever they did was none of his concern anymore. Sir Yanming took out the thousand swords peak’s leather parchment from his breast and caressed its surface before putting it back, it was better to hide it after all. Sir Yanming observed his surroundings and strained his ears before activating his qinggong and vanishing off into smoke.

The ox shaped stone became quiet as it patiently waited for the bustle to come again next year.

In the middle of the night on the same day on thousand swords peak, the sect master Wan Chengjiu just received a message from the fierce tiger sect’s Qu Xiangfeng, “Senior brother Zhang Zhaoyang has disappeared.”

Wan Chengjiu’s face turned into an ugly green color of rust, and his two hands trembled while his eyes were filled with regret, although one cannot be certain if he was regretting the loss of a disciple or the failed attempt to obtain more rare herbs.

In Zhang household’s courtyard, the solemn atmosphere was still prevailing as people walked to and fro to pay their respects. The Zhang household had a good reputation in the Guo village, and the grandmother had always been kind and warm-hearted towards the fellow villagers. Hence, the number of people who

came was not small, and because the Zhang household's main room was not big, only a few people could know while most people stepped in for a short moment to send the grandmother off on her last journey.

On the day of the grandmother's passing, Liu Yueyue was escorted back to Bali Guo under the protection of several reliable people. Teacher Liu had also received the news and was worried both for his recently married off daughter and his new son-in-law. Thus, he arrived in the Zhang household the next day with butcher Liu, and the two men decided to stay temporarily in the grandmother's room to provide some moral support and physical help.

Zhang Xiaohua seemed to be spacing out all the time during these days. He would stay in that little corner of his and nobody could guess what was on his mind. When it came to mealtime, Zhang Xiaohu would bring a bowl of food over and wait for Xiaohua to finish his meal before bringing the bowl away. Zhang Xiaohua would stay in that corner until nighttime when Zhang Xiaohu would carry him back onto the bed after the former fell asleep, and once the first rays of sun appear in the sky, he would return to the corner again like a walking corpse. Teacher Liu was the first person to notice Zhang Xiaohua's abnormal behavior, but everyone could tell that it was caused by missing his grandmother too much although they never saw him cry a single tear.

Guo Sufei has cried countless of times, and was naturally unable to comfort her own son during this period of time. Zhang Cai and the rest were also unsure of what to say or how to persuade the boy, but they all thought that Zhang Xiaohua would recover and naturally walk out on his own in a few days' time.

While happy days are short-lived, the sad periods would not last too long as well. The seven days of mourning period passed soon after, and it was time for the grandmother's coffin was to be buried then. The grave was already prepared, and was situated on one the side of the Guo graveyard hill.

On the afternoon of that day, the people in Zhang household kowtowed towards the grandmother while the other people at the side were getting ready to close the lid of the coffin. As they were about to nail the lid on, Guo Sufei broke out into tears again and refused to let go of her hands from the coffin as she looked at the smiling expression on the grandmother's face. Finally, under the persuasion of Zhang Cai and the others, she softened her grip and let herself

be led aside.

The people who were helping out immediately knocked the nails in and sealed the coffin. Hearing the repetitive hammering sounds, Zhang Xiaohua felt that each sound was like a knock onto his heart.

During this period of time, Zhang Xiaohua felt like he was still living in a dream. He was constantly thinking and regretting. He thought that he could have protected his eldest brother and sister-in-law if he knew martial arts, and they would have returned home happily and their wedding would have gone one smoothly, and the grandmother would not have passed away so soon. Zhang Xiaohua grew to hate himself, he hated his inability to use martial arts to protect his loved ones. Ever since the New Year in Lu town, he has been bullied wherever he went, and he could not defend himself when other people were trampling on his life. He hated that he has not enough strength, and that he could not spend more time with his grandmother because of it.

Even while he was sleeping, the bright flickering lights that seemed to breathe appeared to have felt his anger, and they shone with even greater intensity.

The hammering sounds shook him awake, and he felt a tinge of pain in his heart before realizing that the grandmother is being sealed in her coffin. "Grandmother....." Zhang Xiaohua called softly and the tears which had been held back began to fall like a torrential rain after a drought. Zhang Xiaohua leapt over and pushed the people away in a budge, while those people looked on dazed as they sat on the floor wondering how a thirteen year old boy had just nudged them away.

The coffin has been nailed more than halfway but Zhang Xiaohua was anxious and he used his fingers to grab on to the nail. With a jerk of his arm, the nail which was already settled deep into the wood was yanked out again, and Zhang Xiaohua pushed the heavy coffin lid to reveal the smiling expression on the grandmother's face again.

Zhang Xiaohua continued to call out for his "Grandmother", while his tears streamed uncontrollably down his cheeks and onto his clothes before falling into the coffin.

Everyone was surprised by the astonishing display of strength and they started

to tear quietly as they witness the moving scene before them.

The village had a rule that the coffin has to be buried within the allocated hour or it will be inauspicious and would affect the peaceful rest of the deceased. Even though everyone was crying, they stopped when they noticed the time as they wanted the grandmother to be peaceful even in afterlife. However, the Zhang Xiaohua of that moment could not be consoled, and even though several strong villagers came to pull him away, they were surprised by his strength and failed. Hence, they could only look at Guo Sufei pleadingly but the latter was too upset to try. Just as everyone was about to give up, Liu Qing walked over.

She walked over to Zhang Xiaohua's side and said gently, "Xiaohua....." After four to five calls, Zhang Xiaohua finally turned around and said, "Elder sister Liu, grandmother has really gone away."

Liu Qing has put Zhang Xiaohua's head into her bosom and stroked his hair. She said, "Xiaohua, do you remember what we spoke about at the river outside your village?"

Zhang Xiaohua cried as he replied, "I remember, elder sister. I already knew that grandmother was going to leave me soon at that time."

Liu Qing said, "Yes, Xiaohua, there is no banquet that will never end in this world. Everything must have an end, your grandmother has worked her entire life so it should be the time for her to rest now. Look at your grandmother's face, isn't she smiling so happily? We should be sending her off happily knowing that she could leave with such a happy face. Otherwise, won't you be disturbing her rest and making her angry by behaving the way you are right now?"

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Elder sister, I know this, but, but I will not be able to see grandmother again. I will not have grandmother around anymore, I do not want her to leave me."

Liu Qing continued to say, "Then how long are you planning to stay beside your grandmother? Half a day, a full day, two days, or ten days? Grandmother will have to be buried eventually and you are aware of this. Even if you can accompany her for a time, can you accompany her for all your life? Come, Xiaohua, get up quickly and let them send your grandmother off this final journey."

Zhang Xiaohua looked reluctantly at his grandmother's face as he tried to carve it into his heart while it was gradually covered by the lid. He closed his eyes tiredly and the tears fell continuously from his eyes, while he kept on questioning in his heart on why his grandmother had to leave, and why people cannot live forever?"

There was some distance from the back of the village to the grave site of the grandfather and grandmother, so the other villagers had to help carry the coffin over while the crying Zhang household members followed behind. Many people from the village also went along to send this familiar person away.

The grave had already been dug, so the villagers carefully placed the coffin into the grave and began to shovel dirt over it. Not long after, a mound of earth was shoveled and a new grave was built. The villagers who came to help eventually left, and only the Zhang and Liu households remained behind. Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohua carefully tidied the gravesite of the grandmother while adding on fresh earth onto the grandfather's gravesite. Guo Sufei and Liu Qing then placed the candles and other items which they prepared into the appropriate positions, and everyone stood in front of the grave until twilight before they returned reluctantly.

Chapter 61: Moving house

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Moving house

On this day, teacher Liu and butcher Liu bade their farewells to Zhang Cai, Zhang Xiaohu and Liu Qing who had walked to the village entrance to send them off. Zhang Cai promised again that he would find the Guo village elder as soon as possible to discuss the matter of teacher Liu's moving. Teacher Liu expressed in return that he was willing to wait until the Zhang household had settled. Everyone then split apart.

The next few days were peaceful but lonely as everyone had not gotten used to life without the grandmother, they would think of the latter once in awhile and tears would form in their eyes as they find themselves looking towards the grandmother's room.

Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua had moved into the grandmother's room, and the two were not afraid as there were still the warm memories lingering around which made them feel safe. Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing stayed in the room beside the main room which was already meant for the newlyweds. However, Zhang Xiaolong has gotten himself injured again, so he could only stay in bed as Liu Qing attended to his injuries.

It was already the beginning of March and the other households in Guo village were near the end of their spring farming. The Zhang household was preoccupied with the wedding and funeral, and thus could only begin with their work on that day. Furthermore, Zhang Xiaolong was still not suited for work, so the others had to put in more effort to cover his absence. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua's strength has risen tremendously, and although it cannot be sustained for long, it was very effective for toiling on the fields. Hence, he could finish the work on his small plot of field quickly and went over to help Zhang Cai and Zhang Xiaohu. In the end, the three men were working on the field while Guo Sufei and

Liu Qing were busy preparing the meals and doing the laundry, everyone tried to keep themselves busy to forget their sadness which will slowly erode with time leaving only a painless scar in their hearts.

Maybe the Piaomiao's medicines were effective, or perhaps the spring water from the Zhang household's well had mysterious properties, but whatever the case, Zhang Xiaolong's healed at a fast pace and the rosiness on his face grew more robust as the days passed. By the time the spring field works were more or less done, most of his injuries have healed. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaolong did not get his injuries treated by the animal doctor old Chen, or the latter will be misled to think that his medicines are super-effective again.

Seeing that the crop seeds were waiting to germinate in the fields, the Zhang household heaved a sigh of relief as their busy days which were the best remedy to their sorrow has ended. Now that things were slower, everyone started to reminisce and visit the gravesites from time to time.

Humans are actually strange creatures, the grandfather had passed away so many years ago and the Zhang household would visit his gravesite every year on the festival to commemorate the ancestors in a refreshing mood. However, after the grandmother passed away, everyone would feel as though they were reliving a nightmare. According to Zhang Xiaohua's words, this grandfather was someone he had not met before but the grandmother had doted on him for all his life, so it was natural for him to be more attached to the latter.

Every time they went to visit the grandmother, Zhang Xiaohua would feel self-blame and regret. The time he spent kneeling in front of the grandmother's gravesite did not decrease as the time goes by, and instead became more solemn than before. Perhaps, he would never return to the innocent and carefree lifestyle of the past.

However, he did not know what his next step should be.

Must he leave his home in order to learn martial art?

Upon seeing that the weather has already turned warm and Zhang Xiaolong's injuries were mostly healed, Liu Qing thought of her plan to bring her father into the neighborhood again so she pulled Zhang Xiaolong to find Zhang Cai to discuss on the matter.

Zhang Cai only remember then that he still owe his in-laws a favor, and because the matters in his house and the outstanding work in the field concerns the livelihood of his entire family, he had concentrated all his resources into dealing with them and in the process forgotten of his promise. Nevertheless, it had not been too long since they part, so he hurriedly prepared some presents and went with Guo Sufei to visit the village elder. What he thought would be an easy matter turned out otherwise for a simple reason. There were not many children who could read in the village, and they could not find a teacher in the past so the school had not been in use for several years. Thus, it was demolished to make way for a new settlement, and should teacher Liu come, there will not be a place for him to stay or teach.

Zhang Cai was upset, how could the village elder be so myopic to not see that the children cannot learn to read because the village has no school? In the past, he was not far-sighted enough to send his children to read, and after several interactions with teacher Liu, he found that the illiterate him had not much to say and the things he said were of less substance when conversing with the teacher. Hence, he regretted not starving a little more to send his children to study. This village elder sure had his work cut out for him, to break the future of the village with his own hands and force children who want to learn to go to another village instead. However, all these made Zhang Cai more determined to bring teacher Liu into Guo village.

Since there was not available living quarters, Zhang Cai had to take a step back. He first asked if teacher Liu was allowed to migrate over, and if he could choose the location of his quarters. All matters of the Guo village were governed by the elder so his approval was required for such a request. Without his approval, the person who moved in will find difficulties living harmoniously with the rest of the villagers.

The village elder had met teacher Liu during the grandmother's funeral and formed a good impression of the latter during then. To allow someone of his character to move in was a benefit to the village as a whole, at the very least no one will be troubled to find a scholar in the village in the future. Thus, the village elder did not reject the request, and he even offered a hand when teacher Liu starts building or renovating his house. Upon hearing this, Zhang Cai thanked the elder on teacher Liu's behalf before he left.

When Zhang Cai returned and relayed the elder's approval to Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing, the latter two were naturally happy as well. Actually, the two had not planned to use the school even though it would be more convenient to move into a ready-made house, because a house built by one's own hands would be more comfortable and belong to oneself.

There was a small pond behind the Zhang household's house, and the pond is surrounded by bamboos. Across the pond was an empty space which was overgrown with weeds and usually littered with rubbish. However, if they could clean it up, it would make a suitable courtyard that is in close proximity to water. Furthermore, they could cultivate lotuses on the pond, and there would be an abundance of lotus leaves in autumn, while the bamboo forest on its side also looked elegant. Hence, Liu Qing was satisfied when she inspected the area and she believed that teacher Liu would feel the same way.

However, there were weeds abound and teacher Liu would feel vexed if he saw the plot of space then. Thus, the Zhang brothers gathered their hands and tidied the area up so that teacher Liu could have a better impression and make a better decision when he came.

When teacher Liu received the news and went over to Guo village, the plot of space and the pond were already tidied up. Upon seeing the scenery, teacher Liu grabbed Zhang Cai's hands excitedly and was at a loss of words. The environment was very suitable, it was close enough to the village, and there were sounds of the gentle breeze rustling through the bamboo forest, while the pond was large enough to launch a boat on and would provide inspiration to teacher Liu's word. In short, teacher Liu was very pleased with the plot of space.

After receiving teacher Liu's confirmation, the Zhang household naturally went to work. Teacher Liu first forked out the money for the house construction materials, while the Zhang household naturally provided the labor. The village elder even got some idle labor from the village to help out, and the small courtyard and house started to form semblance of its final look.

There was not many to do in the fields at that time, the farmers only had to water their crops and pull out the weeds. Hence, the Zhang household was mostly busy with building the house, and Zhang Xiaolong even took the construction project as light exercise for his rehabilitation. By the time the house

was built, Zhang Xiaolong's body would have also recovered fully.

Zhang Xiaohua was putting most of his labor into the fields as it was less intensive than the house construction project. Even though it would have been more suitable to let Zhang Xiaolong take his place, the house would have been the newlywed's future home as well so Zhang Cai arranged his son's work in that way.

However, Zhang Xiaohua was becoming less and less interested in farm work, he was preoccupied with his idea of learning martial arts and was wondering on how to go about doing so.

Zhang Xiaohu was also feeling down during that period.

There was not much age difference between Zhang Xiaolong and Zhang Xiaohu, and like Zhang Xiaolong, Zhang Xiaohu was uninterested in most of the ladies from the nearby households. When he first met Liu Yueyue, he also felt love at first sight but never had the opportunity to express his feelings to the other party. When he saw Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing happily passing their days together, he felt envious and finally seized the opportunity to discuss his troubles.

Liu Qing had already become Zhang Xiaohu's elder sister-in-law so she did not beat about the bush and told the latter frankly about Liu Yueyue's feelings. It was akin to pouring cold water on Zhang Xiaohu's excitement and his face turned pale and expressionless for the next few days. Thinking about it again, how could there be another girl like Liu Qing who was able to look past family background and was courageous enough to take her stand on love? If the other party had such good qualifications, why would she turn towards a farm bumpkin? Who would not prefer a rich, handsome man to settle with instead? What was love? It was just a picture of a biscuit, although it looked good, it cannot be used to satisfy one's hunger.

Upon experiencing this setback, Zhang Xiaohu's feelings inevitably turned darker as he thought about the girls around him and Liu Yueyue. He began to feel that life has lost its color, and like Zhang Xiaohua, was thinking about how to get away from the fields and change his own life. If he had to pick a girl he did not like and settle down with her, then would life still be meaningful?

However, on those days when he was spending most of his energy and time on constructing the house, no one noticed any changes in his external behavior, even Liu Qing thought that he had given up the thought for good, and hence kept the matter from Guo Sufei. Instead, she thought that if Zhang Xiaohu would meet another girl whom he likes or someone suitable, then she would do her part as the elder sister-in-law and let Zhang Xiaohu forget about Liu Yueyue completely to pass the rest of his days happily.

As the days gradually grew warmer, the house and courtyard was completed under the combined help of the villagers. Teacher Liu was moving in alone, so there was no large event; he simply packed some daily necessities and his favorite collections of paintings and calligraphy and came over in a wagon. The other things in the house were left for Liu Kai, as well as for butcher Li and Liu Yueyue.

Liu Qing was naturally happy when she received the news, and she pulled Zhang Xiaolong over to help her father unpack. Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei also hurried over, but teacher Liu had few belongings and he settled down not long after. Looking around at the simple courtyard, teacher Liu let out a deep sigh as he was overcome with emotions. He will pass his later years in this place, and when he looked at his reluctant son and happy daughter, his eyes began to turn wet.

Chapter 62: Coming to stay

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Coming to stay

Dinner was naturally eaten at teacher Liu's courtyard. Although there were not enough utensils for everyone, Zhang's household was nearby and it only took a short trip to bring all the required things over.

Guo Sufei was busy preparing the meals in teacher Liu's kitchen. When she saw the small but refined kitchen in the interior of the house, she could not help but feel envious, a learned person is indeed more particular about where things should be placed, and was so unlike her own 'kitchen' where the entire stove was left out in the courtyard under a small shed to block off the rain. Now that she thought about it, she should find some time to discuss with her husband to get the men in her household to build another room to house their kitchen, since it was not too expensive. The idea of an indoor kitchen was caught on quickly by the rest of the Guo village, and it became sort of a trend that teacher Liu kickstarted.

There were fewer people in Guo village than Bali Gou, and the things sold in the market naturally had lesser varieties. Hence, towards the group of villagers who have helped to build his house, teacher Liu was planning to treat them to a good meal, but faced a situation of 'his heart was willing but his flesh was weak', and he offered them a simple meal instead. However, there were many people who helped out and the house could not accommodate everyone. Fortunately, the weather was already warm so everyone brought out the tables and chairs into the courtyard to enjoy the meal. There was no such rule as 'not to talk while eating' among the farming villagers, so everyone chatted happily as they ate. Butcher Liu would even take a swig of his wine from time to time, but teacher Liu, Zhang Cai and Liu Kai were light drinkers. However, under the repeated

toasts of butcher Liu, they naturally could not hold their liquor and soon got drunk. Teacher Liu peered through his squinted eyes to look at the merry crowd, and he felt touched because it was a long time since he had participated in such a rowdy affair, perhaps his daughter was attracted to such an atmosphere. It made him recall his deceased wife whom he saw traces of on Liu Qing's face, and he believed that his daughter has indeed chosen the right decision for herself. Rather, he was pulled along by her onto the same boat, and she was probably hoping that they could adapt to this new lifestyle and live out the remainder of their lives that way.

After the meal, the nighttime breeze turned cold and everyone returned indoors again. Liu Qing was boiling water in the kitchen to make tea with.

When teacher Liu brought the tea to his lips, he sighed deeply in praise. This as the joy of his life, he would not mind being a member of Guo village as long as he could drink this tea daily.

Liu Kai also tasted the tea, and when he turned his gaze towards Zhang Xiaolong who was sitting opposite him, he smiled and asked, "Xiaolong, how are your injuries?"

Zhang Xiaolong hurriedly answered, "Many thanks for elder brother's concern, my injuries have fully recovered and I had not encountered any problems while working on the house earlier."

Butcher Liu also said, "Xiaolong, what had happened on your wedding day? You did not explain clearly then, so I would like to hear the details of the events again now."

Zhang Xiaolong wrinkled his brow but he still recounted the events, except for the sect and name of his benefactor since Lu Yueming has explicitly informed him not to. Naturally, he did not mention the plaque as well.

Even though the story sounded simple, one could still imagine how horrifying it was for the affected people on that day.

Butcher Liu turned silent when he heard the story.

Teacher Liu noticed that the atmosphere had turned chilly, and he interrupted, "I heard that the Xicui mountain bandits have been disbanded, so Xiaolong and

the rest can be relieved because I doubt that any of the bandits will come to look for you.”

Zhang Xiaolong replied, “True, I have left this matter at the back of my head because of my grandmother’s funeral, and only when things have slowed did I feel afraid that those bandits would follow the clue of our wedding and come to look for you. Fortunately, we heard later that they have disbanded, and could finally put this matter to rest.”

Teacher Liu waved his hands and said, “These Xicui mountain bandits are but a motley crew randomly put together, without their leader, they would be like a fox that has lost its tree. None of them would think of revenge, and you are all ordinary villagers so they would not bother to come after you.”

However, Liu Kai said, “That is not necessarily true. The Xicui mountain bandits have existed for a long time, and they have experienced multiple member changes over these decades. Now that they have dispersed, it may not be for long until another person rallies them under their flag again.”

Butcher Liu said loudly, “Whatever that was over has been over. Why would they come to look for revenge?”

Teacher Liu looked at Zhang Xiaolong, he knew that the Zhang household had a Piaomiao sect plaque in their possession and could piece together that their stroke of fortune had something to do with it. The people in Jianghu would assist those in need if there was a fateful encounter, but they would not extricate themselves to help any passer-by, especially to kill the Xicui mountain bandits at the risk of angering the power who was behind the group. However, Zhang Xiaolong must have a good reason to withhold any secret that he was hiding, so teacher Liu did not press on the matter and said, “The possibility of them finding us is not large, and they would look for the person who killed instead of us if they are truly out for revenge, although this does not mean that it is not possible.”

Zhang Xiaolong laughed as he said, “These are only guesses, and we cannot just run away based on them. Even if we have moved, it does not mean that they will not find us. Instead of worrying about the multitude of possibilities that may occur, we would be better off living our lives comfortably in ignorance.”

Liu Kai clapped his hands and said, “Xiaolong’s words are correct and

insightful, haha. Oh right, I wanted to ask you about the poem you composed in Bali Gou, how did you think of it? Why do I not feel that this idea was not thought of by you?”

Zhang Xiaolong’s face turned red but fortunately, no one could see it under the oil lamp. He said sheepishly, “About this, I am not sure of it myself. I have never composed a poem before, and being forced to do so that day made me think of it on the spot, perhaps it was sent to me from the heavens.”

Seeing Zhang Xiaolong’s reaction, Liu Kai did not question any further. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohu who was sitting beside asked suddenly, “Teacher Liu, do you know where Pingyang city is?”

Teacher Liu smiled as he replied, “Of course I would know. Pingyang city is the closest city to Lu town, and is roughly six hundred li northeast of Lu town. Why did you suddenly ask me this?”

Zhang Xiaohu glanced over at Zhang Cai who was sitting on the chair and drinking tea to clear his drunkenness.

His following sentence made everyone surprised.

“I want to go Pingyang city.”

Everyone jumped in shock, and even the Zhang Cai who had his eyes closed opened them.

Zhang Xiaohu looked at Zhang Cai again and continued, “I want to take a look at Pingyang city. Having reached this age, the furthest I have been to is Lu town, and even the name Pingyang city was learnt from someone else’s conversation.”

Zhang Cai then sighed in relief. However, teacher Liu asked, “You only plan to visit there? After some time later, Liu Kai will need to go over to settle some matters, so you can all go together then.”

Zhang Xiaohu clenched his teeth and insisted, “No, I do not just want to take a look at the city. I wish to step out this village and expand by horizons.”

“Ah...., Xiaohu wants to leave the village?” Guo Sufei was tidying the kitchen with Liu Qing, and just happened to step out when she overheard Zhang Xiaohu’s words, and could not help but feel weird about it.

Zhang Xiaohu saw that it was his mother who entered the room and he immediately stood up to let her sit in his seat.

Guo Sufei took the seat which Zhang Xiaohu let and looked towards the latter, before asking curiously, "Xiaohu, why do you want to leave suddenly?"

Seeing everyone's curious gaze being directed towards himself, Zhang Xiaohu organized his thoughts and said, "Father, mother, I have thought about it recently and if I would choose to live in the village like you, I can only look forward to the yellow earth in front of me and the sky behind my back, and I'll only shuttle between our home and the fields. After a few years later, mother would find another daughter-in-law for me to work in the fields together, and we will have children whom we will teach to tend the fields, and when I grow old, I will be buried in the graveyard at the hill behind our village. I feel that this kind of life is too meaningless and dull, I wish to see more colors and meet more people so that I will not regret when I turn old."

Everyone turned silent, and only Zhang Xiaohua who was sitting at the corner gleamed upon hearing his words.

Teacher Liu coughed and look at Zhang Cai before saying, "I can identify with nephew's feelings because I had the same dreams when I was young. I also took steps to try and reach them, but when I did, I was faced with many obstacles and realized that this was not the life I was pursuing, and thus returned to Bali Gou. Nevertheless, it was not a completely fruitless trip because I returned with Qingqing's mother."

Liu Kai also continued to say, "Father is not wrong, but to whomever who has not gone out for himself, how would he know what the outside world is like? How would he determine if it was a suitable lifestyle for himself? I had the same idea as Xiaohu a few years back, and I think that Xiaohu should go out and look at the world personally before deciding. Perhaps after he experienced the cruelty of the outside world, he would return the village while clearing any regrets in his heart."

Butcher Liu said loudly, "What is there to see in Pingyang city, isn't it just several times larger than Lu town? It takes effort just to find a toilet, why would I go there? I do not support this idea."

After hearing up to here, Liu Qing could naturally guess the reason for Zhang Xiaohu's decision. However, she was now a daughter-in-law of the Zhang household, thus she turned to look at the Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei's expressions. Upon seeing their frowns which revealed their unwillingness, Liu Qing pondered before saying, "Pingyang city is large and far from where we are. However, that is the reason why there are many people there. If Xiaohu goes over, he would definitely meet many people, and who knows if he would encounter a lovely lady to bring back for us to meet. It would be much better than finding any other lady within a few steps out of this village, since the good ones are all so rare."

Zhang Xiaohu noticed that Liu Qing has guessed what was on his mind and he sneaked a smile at her.

At that moment, the wrinkle on Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei's brow finally smoothened, it appeared that their son had this sort of intention. Thinking back to how far Pingyang city was, and how Zhang Xiaohu has never travelled so far out from the village, they were naturally uneasy with the idea of letting their son go so far away. However, when they thought of the trouble they went through to find a bride for Zhang Xiaolong, and having no results despite spending such a long time, it would have been a difficult problem if Zhang Xiaolong had not met Liu Qing. Now that Zhang Xiaohu has reached a marriageable age, the matter of a bride search has become another difficult problem, so if he could find a wife on his trip, then wouldn't it solve the problem easily?

After thinking up to here, Zhang Cai was about to give his agreement when he heard another sound rang from aside.

Chapter 63: Leaving home

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Leaving home

“I want to go as well.” The sound came from the corner.

Everyone was stunned again.

Zhang Xiaohu turned around saw that it was Zhang Xiaohua who was sitting at the corner who spoke up.

Guo Sufei snapped angrily, “Xiaohua, why are you stirring up trouble, your second brother is going to find his bride but you are still young so why are you going to Pingyang city?”

Zhang Xiaohu was unhappy and he said angrily, “Mother, I am not going just to find a bride, watch what you are saying.”

Guo Sufei smiled happily as though she could read Zhang Xiaohu’s thoughts, but Zhang Xiaohua’s reply exceeded everyone’s expectations.

“I want to learn martial arts in Pingyang city!”

“Learn martial arts? Why?” Everyone was stumped.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua had crawled out of his corner and stood by the door, he turned his little face to everyone present and said, “Actually, I had already been doing a lot of thinking after the incident when we first met eldest sister-in-law. Up to the misfortunate event during the wedding, it finally dawned on me that the reason we are bullied everywhere is due to the lack of power. If I know martial arts, those people would definitely not take action against us. Furthermore, hasn’t uncle said that the Xicui mountain bandits may find their way to our door at any time? To always rely on external aid to protect us is not the right solution, only after we have our own power can we truly face the

mountain bandits.”

After he said all these, Zhang Xiaohua turned his head and looked outside. Seeing that the courtyard was already dark and there were little stars in the sky, he continued, “Only after learning martial arts can I have the ability to protect myself and everyone else.”

The listeners had varying responses to Zhang Xiaohua’s words. Teacher Liu and Liu Kai were looked at him with a surprised expression. Zhang Xiaohua’s display of his calligraphy led them to have a very high impression of the boy, but upon hearing these words of his, they began to reconsider their evaluation.

Butcher Liu opened his mouth as though he had something to say but nothing came out of him.

There were traces of guilt on Zhang Xiaolong’s face, although he felt slightly proud deep inside when he looked at this youngest brother whom he had brought up since young.

Zhang Xiaohu had an expression of joy, he appeared to have found his path as he faced his little brother who was a head shorter than him.

Guo Sufei and Zhang Cai exchanged glances, smoothed their brows and wrinkled them again as they did not prioritize their own safety in front of their son’s one.

Liu Qing’s expression was unchanged as though she had talked to the Zhang Xiaohua before and thus expected this outcome.

Finally, it was teacher Liu who first spoke up. He said, “Xiaohua, this idea of yours is not wrong, and although I have not learned martial arts before, I have heard that the path is fraught with difficulties and danger. You will not be able to see any changes immediately, and at the same time, it is very easy to get injured or even lose your life on the way, so you have to consider your decision carefully. Furthermore, I feel that you are a very smart child who is suitable for learning, so why don’t you consider studying under me and taking the exams to become an official while bringing glory to your family?”

Liu Kai also persuaded, “There is a saying: the poor pursues literature and rich trains in martial arts. Learning martial arts is not a luxury that poor people like us

can afford. Xiaohua has displayed such good calligraphy the previous time, if you study under my father, I am sure you can find a safe and healthy path for yourself.”

Guo Sufei and Zhang Cai still did not speak up and their brows remained wrinkled.

Zhang Xiaohu said, “They are right, Xiaohua. Why don’t you stay at home and study, and let me go to Pingyang city to learn martial arts. I have already grown up so our parents can feel more relaxed. You are just a small child, how could they bear to see you go so far away?”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at his audience and asked, “Can studying protect our family from the mountain bandits? Can studying suppress injustice and bring peace?”

Nobody could answer him.

Zhang Cai asked, “How do you plan to learn martial arts in Pingyang city?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Wasn’t Wen Wenhai who saved us in Lu town from Piaomiao sect in Pingyang city? Perhaps I can learn martial arts if I find him.”

Guo Sufei said, “Xiaohua, you are still young, why don’t you wait a little before you go?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled towards his mother as he replied, “Mother, determination is not dependent on age. Furthermore, I am not young and should find an appropriate path for myself, if not I will not be able to find a suitable bride when I grow up as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s words did manage to force out some laughter from Guo Sufei who said, “Already thinking of finding a bride at your age.”

Zhang Cai pondered a while before he said, “Xiaolong, Qingqing, bring Xiaohu and Xiaohua back to bed with you. Your mother and I will discuss about this matter.”

Zhang Xiaolong stood up as he was told to and brought Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua back home along with Liu Qing.

There were only five people left in the main room,

Zhang Cai asked teacher Liu, “How does the in-laws feels about this?”

Teacher Liu smiled as he said, “No matter the outcome, I will first have to congratulate my in-laws for producing such outstanding sons. Our In-laws are truly blessed to have two sons who are able to worry about their household affairs at that age and courageously face their difficulties while thinking of a solution to overcome them about themselves.”

Zhang Cai was very happy in his heart but he waved his hands and said, “Those were just some unrestrained thoughts by our children, there is no need to treat them for real.”

Teacher Liu said with a straight face, “I am not giving out empty praises, how many children outside your household are able to think that way and say such words? However, he is still young and unaware of the dangers in the world, so going out to gain some experience may be a good thing for him. Furthermore, won't Xiaohu be there to take care of him on the way? Once he has learnt of the dangers in the outside world, he would naturally miss the warmth and comfort of home and come back without you telling him to. Xiaohu might meet a suitable lady at the same time, and perhaps they would come back together.”

Liu Kai interrupted and said, “Uncle, I think that Xiaohua going out may not be a bad thing. I feel that Xiaohua is not a simple child, and staying in this small village would waste his potential. Perhaps he may have a lucky encounter when he goes out and end up to accomplish larger things.”

Zhang Cai smiled bitterly as he said, “What larger thing? I do not have any high expectations, as long as he gets married and form a family, and live the rest of his life stably, both of us will be satisfied. The larger things can be left to the people who live in the towns while we villagers will be contented with our village lives.”

Guo Sufei said unhappily, “He is saying the facts as they are, I still remembered the sky full of lower petals when I gave birth to Xiaohua, maybe it was a sign that my son will grow up to accomplish great things.”

However, she continued reluctantly, “But Pingyang city is so far, why don't we let him learn martial arts in Lu town. It is close enough so we can visit when we miss him, otherwise it is too inconvenient if he goes to Pingyang city.”

Butcher Liu said, “That’s right, isn’t there the fierce tiger sect in Lu town? He can still learn martial arts there.”

Hearing the words “Fierce tiger sect”, Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei jumped as they still remembered that the bodyguard of the town bully was from that sect. Seeing how they are willing to perpetuate injustice, they cannot be anything good, and their family is still holding on to those checks which they still do not know what to do with, how could they let Xiaohua go to the fierce tiger sect?”

Guo Sufei asked teacher Liu, “Does our in-laws approve of them leaving?”

Teacher Liu nodded his head and said, “Yes, we scholars have this saying ‘reading a thousand books is equal to travelling a hundred li’. Only by going out to experience the world would one understand the contents inside the books. Learning martial arts is the same, even if you are talented, staying in this mountain village would make one short-sighted. I approve of them going out to expand their horizons.”

Butcher Liu said, “Go for what? Staying at home is so relaxing, I do not approve.”

Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei exchanged glances and said, “We will think about this matter in the future and find a better solution then.”

The few people continued to chat idly, and they finally parted when the sky turned dark.

On that night, Guo Sufei and Zhang Cai discussed the matter thoroughly, and only fell asleep when the sky was about to turn bright.

Butcher Liu and Liu Kai could not stay in Guo village for too long, they left soon after they finished their meal. Before he left, Liu Kai gave the directions to Pingyang city and the things to note to Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua who listened very carefully to his words and committed them to memory. Seeing Liu Kai’s actions, the both of them smiled slightly thinking that their parents have been convinced.

After sending off butcher Liu and Liu Kai, Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua were about to go and work on their fields when they realized a problem, how can their family make up for the shortage of manpower if the two of them leave?”

The Zhang Xiaolong and Liu Qing who were walking beside them seemed to guess their thoughts, and Zhang Xiaolong said, “The two of you can go out into the world without regrets. I have discussed with your sister-in-law last night, the original plot of land can be left to father, while the land beside the river and Xiaohua’s field on the hills can be shared by the two of us and our mother. With the four of us, won’t there be enough manpower for just these two and a half fields?”

Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu looked at their eldest brother and sister-in-law quietly while they felt warm and fuzzy in their hearts.

Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei did not raise this matter during the next few days, which made Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua feel anxious inevitably. Just as they were about to ask their parents again, Zhang Cai said unexpectedly, “About the matter of you two leaving for Pingyang city, your mother and I have discussed and decided to follow your decisions. We have already prepared some sets of food and clothing for you, so bring them along.”

Looking at Liu Qing’s smiling expression as she stood at a side, they guessed that the items must have been the effort of their sister-in-law.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he said to Liu Qing, “Sister-in-law, if you already knew the decision of our parents, why did you keep it to yourself and watch us get anxious?”

Liu Qing replied, “When you are outside, you have to do things carefully and not rush into a decision without prior considerations while facing every situation calmly, so isn’t this a good little test for you guys?”

Chapter 64: Getting on the road

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Getting on the road

Hearing Liu Qing's reply, Zhang Xiaohua became introspective. Indeed, he has always been under the shelter of his home, but all the decisions will have to be made by himself in the future. Even though his second brother will be by his side, he would still need to remain alert to any oncoming situation. Thus, his sister-in-law's words had struck the nail on its head.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's expression as he was in thought, Liu Qing felt relieved as she stroke his head and said, "I am sure Xiaohua will be able to adapt to any situation."

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and smiled brilliantly. He said with a determined expression, "Yes, sister-in-law, I definitely will."

Zhang Xiaolong also walked over, he took out two checks from his breast and handed them over to Zhang Xiaohu and said, "Xiaohu, this are the checks that we received when we were in Lu town. We never had the chance to use them, and since nobody has come to collect them yet, I think that they will be safe to use."

Zhang Xiaohu did not take the checks and turned to face Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei. He said, "Father, mother, I think that it is better if we do not take these checks along. It does not belong to us after all, what if those bullies send people over to claim it back and we do not have the money to return them? Suppose if they come over every day to cause trouble for us?"

Guo Sufei let out a sigh and took out a handkerchief from her bosom. She unfolded the handkerchief to reveal some broken pieces of silver and handed them over to Zhang Xiaohu while saying, "Xiaohu-ah, these are some silvers that

our household has saved over time. When you are out there with Xiaohua, do not be too frugal and take better care of your bodies. We do not need so much money around the house so you should take this with you.”

Zhang Xiaohu received the handkerchief and before he could take some of the silvers out to return to his mother, Guo Sufei folded the handkerchief and pressed it into his hands. Thus, Zhang Xiaohu kept the all the silvers carefully in his breast.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu reject the checks, Zhang Xiaolong took out the Piaomiao sect plaque from his breast and said, “Xiaohu, even if you do not take the checks, you must still bring this plaque with you. Otherwise, you will be turned away at the door when you reached there. Take this plaque and find heroine Xu so your chances of entering the sect can increase.”

Zhang Xiaohu shook his head and said, “Eldest brother, this plaque was given to us by heroine Xu so that we can protect ourselves, and it should not be used in this way. We should rely on our own strength rather than heroine Xu’s influence to enter Piaomiao sect, if not we might cause some misunderstandings between us and heroine Xu. Furthermore, the bullies in Lu town and the Xicui mountain bandits may come up to our door and find us anytime, so we may still need to have this plaque to overcome any difficult situation. Xiaohua and I are only going over to learn martial arts to protect the people in our household, so there is no need to bring this protective talisman along with us.”

Before Zhang Xiaohu could finish his sentence, another voice from praised him from outside, “Good ambition, Xiaohu is right. Everything in this world has to be obtained using one’s own power and it is not realistic to always depend on someone else.”

Everyone turned their heads as they guessed correctly that teacher Liu has come over to send Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua off.

Teacher Liu walked over to their side, one of his hand stroke Zhang Xiaohua’s head while the other hands patted Zhang Xiaohu’s shoulders, and he said with satisfaction, “You both are good children. Remember to be careful, and that hard work must be paid before you can receive any returns. Do not leave anything to chance, do not partake in any dangerous things, and always

remember that your parents and family are waiting here for you two to come back. After you leave, you must carefully consider the consequences before taking any actions, do not do things blindly. While being passionate is a good thing, always consider your family's circumstances beforehand."

After finishing his sentence, he took out a check from his breast and handed it over to Zhang Xiaohu while he said, "This is a little savings of mine, uncles does not have much to give when the both of you go out into the world. Take this along, it may come in handy during any unexpected emergency."

Zhang Xiaohu did not dare to accept the money and turned to look at Zhang Cai and Guo Sufei. Zhang Cai said, "Our in-laws, this is not necessary, we have already given enough silvers to Xiaohu to spend. Even though we appreciate your kind intentions, we cannot accept this money."

Teacher Liu laughed as he said, "My in-laws, look at you still treating me as an outsider. I will be living with you all in the future, why is there a need to separate yours from mine? I have no use for these silvers anyway, and Xiaohu can bring them back to me if he does not spend them, so it is better to let them take it along."

Liu Qing added, "Father has good reasons, Xiaohu, you should just accept them. At the most, you can return them if they are not spent."

Zhang Cai did not say anything else, and Zhang Xiaohu pondered a moment before receiving the check and keeping it into his breast, saying, "Thank you uncle."

Teacher Liu smiled with satisfaction.

On that night, everyone sat in the main room of the Zhang household, and under the shaking oil lamp light, they shared many words. Teacher Liu recounted all his experiences and knowledge of the world outside, while Guo Sufei drilled into the two boys on all the things to note about living by themselves. Finally, everyone was yawning and they scattered into their respective places.

In the grandmother's room, Zhang Xiaohua called out faintly for his grandmother as he slowly fell asleep.

Zhang Xiaohu was tossing about as he was unable to sleep. He initially wanted

to go Pingyang city to gain more self-worth after Liu Yueyue's rejection, but was pulled along by Zhang Xiaohua's idea into entering the path of martial arts. However, he had not thought of how to embark on this path, and his family members were also helpless in this regard. Even though Zhang Xiaohua was sleeping soundly, he did not want to go into this without any clear direction to end up returning home after spending all the money. Suddenly, he wondered if that was his parents' intention all along."

On the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua woke up early as usual, washed his face and went up the hill to draw more spring water. He filled the large water vat in his household to its brim, hoping to save his family some trouble before he left.

When Guo Sufei woke up and saw that Zhang Xiaohua was already up and working, she felt warm and reassured. However, her eyes were still red as she thought of how soon it was for child to grow up, and how she could not bear for him to part from her.

After a simple breakfast, Zhang Cai brought the whole family to the grandfather and grandmother's gravesite to pay their respects before returning to prepare their luggage for the journey.

Actually, everything was already packed so all they did was one final inspection. Then, everyone took the luggage and left the house, while teacher Liu also tagged along.

The people in the village were mostly working on their fields, so they had met several fellow villagers on their way who noticed from his appearance that Zhang Xiaohu was leaving and they bade their farewells to him.

Just like that, they walked slowly to the village entrance.

Just as they were about to split up, Zhang Xiaolong took the slightly large knapsack and placed it on Zhang Xiaohu's back, while Liu Qing helped Zhang Xiaohua put on his slightly smaller one. Guo Sufei has arranged Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua's clothes neatly, but her tears were continuously falling and she said to the two sons, "Be safe when you leave, and come back early if you cannot make it."

Zhang Cai did not say anything, he looked lovingly at his two sons and his eyes

also turned red.

Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua replied in a slightly frustrated tone, “It is nothing much, mother. Aren’t we just going out to travel for a while. Even though this will be our first trip to Pingyang city, we have already grown up and should explore the world at our age. You do not need to worry because we will take good care of ourselves.”

Seeing her children’s response, Guo Sufei was still unable to settle her emotions and said, “Children, do not be overconfident, be careful in everything that you do. Xiaohua is still young so Xiaohu has to take good care of his little brother, and be careful not to let him suffer.”

Zhang Xiaohu promised his mother again that he would take good care of Zhang Xiaohua, and Guo Sufei finally let the matter rest.

Zhang Cai looked at the sky and said, “The children’s mother, we should talk less, and let them be on their way. They still need to reach Lu town in time to catch the wagon, don’t make them be late.”

Guo Sufei thought about it and let go of her hands. Zhang Xiaolong, Liu Qing and teacher Liu also went forward to say their last farewells before Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua put on their knapsacks and set off on their journey. After taking a few ten steps, Zhang Xiaohua turned back and looked at the breeze which blew Guo Sufei’s white hair. His heart which had always been steadfast suddenly collapsed, and the tears started to fall from his eyes uncontrollably.

Zhang Xiaohua threw his knapsack down, turned around and threw himself into his mother’s embrace to give her one last tight hug.

Guo Sufei embraced her child and she also started to cry. After half a bell of time, Zhang Xiaohua finally loosened himself, and Guo Sufei asked, “Xiaohua, why don’t you stay with mother at home, alright?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head as he wiped the tears from his eyes and said, “No, mother. I will definitely leave today but these will be my last tears. I will not cry again, and I do not want to see my loved ones cry even more so. Even if I have to bleed, I will not let you all bleed for me. Believe me mother, I will accomplish something. All of you can sit back and watch your son as he works hard.”

Guo Sufe wiped her tears as well and nodded, "I believe in you, Xiaohua. You will be successful and not let us down."

Zhang Cai's eyes also started to tear but he wiped them off immediately.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at his family members again, wishing to carve the scene into his heart as he turned around and left. Right at that moment, Zhang Cai said, "Wait."

Zhang Xiaohua paused his footsteps and turned to look at his father curiously.

Zhang Cai walked to the front and looked at this son of his. He hugged his son tightly, and Zhang Xiaohua could smell his father's scent which made his heart agitated. For as long as he could remember, his father had never hugged him, which made him believe that his father did not like him too much. However, he then realized that his father's love to him did not lose out to his mother, only his method of expression was different.

After some time, Zhang Cai released his embrace and said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Go ahead, son. Father and mother will always be at home waiting for you."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, "Father, you will have to take good care of yourself too."

Zhang Xiaohua turned around, put on his knapsack and waved to the people behind him before walking ahead with renewed determination.

After Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohua's figures disappeared as they turned to another hill, Zhang Cai, Guo Sufe and the rest returned back reluctantly. The two parents looked at the distance as they wondered when they would even see their sons again.

Guo Sufe asked Zhang Cai, "The children's father, do you think our children will be taken advantaged of outside?"

Zhang Cai replied, "Relax, they will come back soon after going through some difficulties. Just treat this as a leisure trip for them."

Unfortunately, they were unaware that the steps Zhang Xiaohua took on that day were not the simple steps out of a desolated mountain village, but large steps that would influence the entire Jianghu.

Chapter 65: On the road

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

On the road

The weather in mid-April was obviously hot, and Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua started to sweat all the way to their backs after walking for half a bell worth of time.

At first, the two carried many thoughts in their hearts, and they also missed their family. Hence, they did not talk and the journey became a very quiet one.

However, as they walked for a longer time, their moods began to lift, and the beautiful scenery around them slowly opened their hearts, revealing smiles on their faces and they began to share some conversation.

Seeing the occasional horse that would run past, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but ask Zhang Xiaohu, "Second brother, it seems like there is quite some distance between Lu town and Pingyang city. How long do you think we will take to reach there?"

Zhang Xiaohu looked at Zhang Xiaohua and smiled. He said, "It seems to be a few hundred li of distance. If we were to travel on foot, it should take roughly seventy to eighty days of time."

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned and he asked, "So long? Then wouldn't the weather start to cool by the time we reach Pingyang city?"

Zhang Xiaohu replied, "Of course we will not be walking for the whole journey, haven't you heard what teacher Liu said? There is a carriage from Lu town to Pingyang city so after we reached Lu town, we will have to look for a carriage that is heading towards Pingyang city and give them some money. If not, we will be enjoying the autumn cool by the time we reach there, and our clothes will be tattered not to mention the shoes we have to wear while walking. From that, I

could tell that you were not listening attentively when teacher Liu was talking.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned red as he said meekly, “I do not recall teacher Liu telling these to us, why don’t I remember?”

The two people conversed as they walked so they did not get bored, and finally, they managed to reach Lu town by noon.

This was the first time Zhang Xiaohua came to Lu town after the New Year incident, and when he saw the unchanged bustle of the streets, he felt complex emotions turning in his heart. Unknowingly, he stopped in his tracks while his mood turned clearer and his eyes turned brighter and the events that happened half a year ago flashed across his mind. His originally tender heart gradually matured as his thoughts went back to the sentimental times of his youth.

Zhang Xiaohu walked a few steps and noticed that Zhang Xiaohua was not following behind, so he turned around and patted on the latter’s shoulder. He said, “Why are you dazed? This is not the first time you came to Lu town, and it won’t be too late to become dazed when you reach Pingyang city.”

The slap woke Zhang Xiaohua out of his daydream and he smiled, “It has been a while since I came so I was thinking a little. I wonder where those two bullies are, hopefully we will not get to meet them.”

Zhang Xiaohu glanced at his surroundings warily and said, “En, but that is not unlikely. Lu town is only as big as a palm; it would be quite possible to meet them again.”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at Zhang Xiaohu’s expression and he said, “It is alright, second brother. There is no need to worry because even if we do stumble across them, they would probably not recognize us. After all, their attention was drawn towards the sister-in-law and hero Wen at that time.”

Zhang Xiaohu also felt that he was overreacting but he still said, “There is no harm playing on the side of caution. Let’s find a carriage and leave this place quickly. The sooner we leave, the safer we will be.”

After asking a passerby on directions to the nearest carriage station, the two hurriedly went to the “BiaoChi” carriage situated in the west of Lu town. After asking the owner, they learnt that a carriage has already set off in the morning,

and the next trip will be in an hour's time. Zhang Xiaohu quickly asked for a quote and reserved two seats on the carriage before he finally relaxed. Even though his heart felt reluctant from the casual expenditure of a few silvers, it was still necessary to avoid the long journey on foot. Hence, he took out the money from his pouch and paid the owner.

The two people did not dare to venture too far off, so they waited under the shade of a tree, opened their knapsacks and took out some of the dry rations their mother had prepared to eat hurriedly, before going over to the carriage station to get some water. Finally, they sat under the shade of the tree and waited for their departure time.

Not long after, the time for the carriage departure arrived, and all the passengers boarded the carriage. Including the two Zhang brothers, there were a total of seven people, an elderly couple, a middle aged woman with a younger lady, and a young scholar.

When it came to Zhang Xiaohu's turn to board the carriage, he felt nervous as it was his first time using such a large carriage. The carriage was five to six times larger than the wagons commonly found in Guo village, and there were two horses that were pulling it. When Zhang Xiaohua drew the curtains to step inside the shack, he looked at the interior with curiosity, there were eight small tables placed together, several small mats arranged around them presumably for people to sit, and two windows on each side of the walls with their curtains drawn. Although there was nothing else that was particularly useful, and the mats were slightly worn, how could Zhang Xiaohua mind these details? He found a mat close to the window and sat down, while Zhang Xiaohu chose the seat beside him.

The other passengers also chose their seats, leaving only the young scholar who wrinkled his brow and pondered for a long time before taking out a white piece of cloth and setting it above a mat which he sat on. However, he shuffled after sitting down as though he was uncomfortable and glanced around at his surroundings. His eye brightened when he saw Xiaohua's seat which was beside the window and a table, and he asked Zhang Xiaohua, "This little brother, I plan to read my book when the carriage is moving later. The light here is not too good, do you mind exchanging seats with me?"

Zhang Xiaohua had no objections, he could not read and the reason he chose a window seat was to look at the scenery when the carriage was moving. Since the scholar was sitting at the outmost corner of the carriage, he could still peek out of the curtains to enjoy the scenery so the two seats were no different to him. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he nodded, and he lifted his body to switch seats with the scholar who cupped his hands gratefully.

When everyone was finally seated, a person from the carriage station drew open the curtains to invite a muscular man with a blade on his belt to sit in the last seat, before introducing the newest addition to the rest of the passengers, "This person is master Wang who will be taking care of your safety during this journey, please do not hesitate to find him if you encounter any problems."

The muscular man cupped his hands towards the rest of the passengers and said, "This person here is Wang Qisheng, please take care of me during our trip."

Finally, an old, slightly hunched man with a face full of wrinkles and a whip in his hand smiled towards the passengers and said, "This old man is your driver, I hope that we will have a smooth trip." After finishing his sentence, he did not stay any further and walked off.

The person from the carriage station smiled and explained, "This driver Wang has an eccentric personality, I hope you are not offended, and I wish you a safe trip as well."

After he finished his sentence, he pulled down the curtains and the carriage began to move off slowly.

Zhang Xiaohua peeked through the curtains that were lifted up by the wind to look at the trail behind. He felt the speed of the carriage picking up, and knew that he was getting farther away from home, and having left his old lifestyle, what would come next? An uncertain future. Even though the journey in the morning marked the beginning of his departure, he was still familiar with his surroundings. However, as the carriage started moving, he was stepping into unfamiliar territory, and his heart began to pump faster and his eyes turned watery. Nevertheless, Zhang Xiaohua continued to encourage himself, he has told his mother in the morning that the cry would be his last, and he would grow up and not cry anymore.

Zhang Xiaohu seemed to have noticed the change in his younger brother's expression so he extended his hand to grab on to the latter, and smiled without saying anything. Zhang Xiaohua could understand his intention through his gaze, and his emotions began to stabilize.

As the carriage moved, the familiar surroundings grew more and more distant, but Zhang Xiaohua's hope for the future grew as well.

During the journey, the passengers were not familiar with each other so there was not much conversation. Since it was the first time Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu had traveled so far from their home, Zhang Xiaohu did not know what to say and he only held his brother's hands. However, following the rhythm of the carriage, and adding on the fact that he did not have a good night sleep, his eyes slowly closed themselves and his body sprawled on the table as he fell asleep.

Zhang Xiaohua released himself from his second brother's grip and pondered if he should pull a blanket over him. However, the afternoon weather was still hot, and a gentle breeze came in from the windows of the carriage, so he put away the idea.

The driver for their journey was pretty skillful, even though the two horses were galloping across the main road at a high speed, the passengers inside the carriage did not feel too much instability. Hence, most of the passengers were asleep like Zhang Xiaohu.

Zhang Xiaohua also wanted to sleep, the journey was long and he could not possibly entertain himself with the scenery for the whole trip. He felt that something was strange with his body, even though he had no problems sleeping at night, he could not fall asleep in the day no matter how hard he tried. He remembered that this had not always been the case, he would use to go to the shade under a tree every day after lunch to take a nap. Since when did he lose this habit? What a pity, he wanted to experience napping on the cool large rock under the tree beside his field. Whatever, he should stop thinking of the fields, and the rock can be left there for his eldest brother to sleep on. However, Zhang Xiaohua was also mystified, he had heard from his eldest brother that nobody was able to wake him up before the sky turned lighter, what could be the cause of this? Furthermore, about his dreams, he always had the same dream every night. Zhang Xiaohua pondered until he was annoyed and he shook his head in

confusion.

Oh right, his strength has also grown by quite a stretch. Even though he has not competed with his eldest brother or second brother in strength, he was confident that he would not lose. Thinking of this made him happy, he was only thirteen years old so by the time he reached his elder brother's age, his strength must have grown even more, and he would be an even greater help in the fields, ah, why did he think of working in the fields again? He should concentrate on picking up martial arts since protecting his family in the case of an emergency was his highest priority, who knows if the Xicui mountain bandits have really let go of their revenge?

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua continued to let his imagination run wild as the carriage continued to move throughout the whole afternoon until the sky darkened. Then, the carriage began to slow down.

The other passengers in the carriage also began to wake up one by one. Zhang Xiaohu rubbed his eyes and stretched his lazy bone. Then, he looked out of the window and asked Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, have you slept? Where are we now?"

Zhang Xiaohua gloomily replied, "I did not sleep, however, I do not know where we are at."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled as he said, "You would be an immortal if you did."

At that moment, the scholar sitting beside Zhang Xiaohu said, "We are reaching Bao town, which is a town around the same size as Lu town."

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised as he said, "Bao town, what a good name. Could there be any treasure (Bao) in the town?"

The young scholar was also surprised by his response, and sniggered as he replied, "This elder brother is humorous. I have not heard of any treasure in Bao town, but the town got its name because there was a famous person named Bao who came from this city."

Zhang Xiaohu suddenly felt embarrassed.

Chapter 66: Encounter on the road

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Encounter on the road

Even though it can be said that they were reaching Bao town, it was only after the sky turned pitch dark when they finally arrived. The carriage stopped in front of a carriage station and the bodyguard hopped off the shack. While the two Zhang brothers were feeling confused over the current situation, the other passengers also got off the carriage, and the young scholar, upon seeing the dazed looks on their faces, smiled as he said, “If you don’t get off the carriage, then are you planning to spend the night inside it?”

Zhang Xiaohua was shocked and he asked, “Wasn’t this a straight trip to Pingyang city? Why must we take a detour?”

The scholar smiled as he said, “Even if we do not need to rest, the horses need theirs. Otherwise, they would die of exhaustion even before reaching Pingyang city. Furthermore, travelling in the night is very dangerous, unless someone has an urgent and important reason, nobody will journey in the night. This “BiaoChi” carriage station has multiple branches in different towns, and they will follow a predetermined route and schedule. Thus, we will be resting here for tonight, so come down quickly.”

The two Zhang brothers finally understood and they secretly blamed teacher Liu and Liu Kai for not sharing this important tidbit causing them to be butt of other people’s jokes. When the two finally got off the carriage and into the rest stall, the other people had already taken the best positions and have ordered their dinner for that night. The two Zhang brothers were about to find their own seats when the scholar invited them to a corner. The two exchanged glances before they walked over and sat down, while the scholar poured them some water and said, “Many thanks to these two brothers for giving up your seat to

me. What do you say if I treat the two of you to dinner tonight?”

Zhang Xiaohua waved his hands and said, “There is no need, we only gave up our seats. There is no need for any kind of repayment so let’s just eat what we order.”

Upon hearing the rejection, the scholar did not insist any further and he called the waiter over to order his selections.

The two Zhang brothers have never entered a restaurant before. Fortunately, teacher Liu has shared with them the proper decorum, so they ordered a few simple dishes and looked at the silvers they spent. Although the price was not too expensive, they could not help but feel hurt at their expenditure.

While they were waiting for the dishes to arrive, the scholar and the two Zhang brothers engaged in some casual talk. They learnt that the scholar’s name was Li Jinfeng, and was a student in one of the schools in Pingyang city. Zhang Xiaohua started asking about Piaomiao sect whose reputation Li Jinfeng has heard of, but he did not know where their location was. Seeing the disappointed expression on Zhang Xiaohua’s face, Li Jinfeng patted his chest and promised that he will find news on Piaomiao sect when they arrived in Pingyang city, and Zhang Xiaohua’s mood brightened considerably.

There were guestrooms and common sleeping rooms behind the carriage station which were not included in the carriage fees. After their meals, Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu naturally chose the cheapest common sleeping room and they did not notice the other passengers who presumably rented the cleaner guestrooms.

The beds in the common sleeping room were naturally not as clean, and there was an unpleasant odor from the bedsheets as well. However, Zhang Xiaohua was not nitpicky about these things, he was tired and fell asleep as soon as he lay on the bed, leaving Zhang Xiaohu who carefully kept their knapsacks before he lay down and sleep as well.

Near Pingyang city inside Piaomiao discussion hall.

Candles as thick as an infant’s arm lit the entire hall until it was as bright as day.

Ou Peng sat solemnly on his chair while the other five tigers of Piaomiao were seated on the first two rows before him. All the other seats in the discussion hall were taken, and there were even quite a few people standing at attention behind the seats. Outside the discussion hall were even more people standing at attention as well as, and the atmosphere was tensed if a big battle was coming up.

The people sitting in the discussion hall were murmuring to each other and their soft chatters filled the entire room.

Ou Peng wrinkled his brow and gave a light cough. The entire hall of people immediately quietened down as they turned their attention to Ou Peng.

Ou Peng studied his audience before resting his gaze on fourth elder Shangguan. He asked, "Junior brother Shangguan, how is the plan to attack Luoshui sect proceeding?"

Fourth elder Shangguan stood up and reported, "Sect master Ou, our sect's elites have finally infiltrated the core locations under Luoshui sect's influence after two months of careful deployment. They are currently waiting for your orders to attack, and I believe that our chances of victory is almost certain."

Ou Peng turned to ask Zhang Chengyue, "How is the recruitment of the new disciples going so far?"

Zhang Chengyue hurriedly went forward and performed a greeting before he said, "Sect master Ou, we have recruited in excess of four hundred children with good potential for martial arts and have allocated them among our fellow disciples who are in charge of overseeing the new recruits. Senior uncle Shangguan has deployed the whole sect causing some fellow members to feel anxious, and I have already filled up the manpower shortage with members from the Lotus escort."

Ou Peng nodded his head in satisfaction as he said, "Our security is still paramount, we would not want to end up as the mantis which preyed on the cicada but was hunted by the oriole instead. Also remember to fill up the vacancy we have caused in Lotus escort as soon as possible."

Zhang Chengyue replied, "Your disciple has already taken note, and we have started recruiting since the beginning of the month."

Ou Peng said, “Not bad, you have done well this time. Zhengyue, you will be in charge of all sect matters during this period when we are away. I will leave behind you senior uncle Hu to guide you along if needed.”

Zhang Chengyue nodded in understanding.

Ou Peng turned his head to first elder Hu and said, “Eldest brother, stay behind to be our backup, alright?”

First elder Hu smiled as he replied, “Fine, I need to rest these old bags of bones anyway.”

Ou Peng stood up and addressed the audience, “Alright, since all the preparations have been made, release the signal to begin our assault on Luoshui sect. After taking them down, our sect will be promoted to a first-tier sect.”

After he finished his sentence, he raised his hands and the people in the discussion hall immediately became busy as they spread the same sentence to different places, the sentence being “Begin the attack!”

Ou Peng turned to his fellow disciple brothers and the second generation disciples and said, “Come, let’s see if Luoshui sect has any triumph card to defend against us.”

Then, he took the lead as he walked out of the discussion hall.

There were already several horses prepared outside the discussion hall, and the party followed Ou Peng’s lead as they got on the horses and set off under the cover of the night.

Within Bao town’s “Biaochi” carriage station, the passengers who had travelled the entire day were deep in their sleep as they snored one after the other, making an incredible sight to see.

Suddenly, the sounds of angry voices, followed by weapon clashing broke the peace of the night. Some of the passengers were rudely awoken and thus in a bad mood. One particular man shouted even before he opened his eyes, “Which bastard is sick of living, how dare they wake this master up?”

The scuffle became louder, and even Zhang Xiaohu was woken up from the sound of the clashes. Before he could sit up, he heard a “Swoosh” sound

followed by a “Peng” sound and an object was stuck onto a pillar in the room. Everyone borrowed the light of the moon to observe the object, and it turned out to be an arrow which shot through the window. Thus, everyone was startled and they lost the will to continue sleeping.

At that moment, a shout travelled from outside and said, “The fierce tiger sect brothers are conducting their business here, those who are not involved should stay where they are, those who should be sleeping better go back to sleep or at least keep their smelly mouth shut.”

Immediately, everyone became silent as their fear could be seen through their eyes.

The fight continued to sound outside, and finally, some people succumbed to their curiosity and crept to the window, while others peeped through the holes on the wall as they tried to observe the current situation.

There were two groups of people fighting out on the street, some people were wielding weapons, others were using their bare fists, and the fight was very intense. Every now and then, a sound of despair would come up, and even though the moonlight was illuminating the scene, it was still too dark to see what was happening clearly. After some time, perhaps because victory was beginning to lean on one side, someone blew his whistle and a group of people immediately scattered in different directions. Among them, some even activated their qinggong and head towards the carriage station, scaring the spectators in the room who immediately shrunk their necks and hide their bodies within the darkness. Only after the escapees have gone far, they extended their heads again and by that time, the street was peaceful again. However, there were still some black figures left, who were probably disposing of the dead bodies. However, nobody dared to go forward to verify their conjecture, and a timid voice said, “It is finished, hurry close the window and go back to sleep.”

Another braver person said “Let’s watch for a little longer to see if there is anyone who will pick up the corpse.”

Zhang Xiaohu was also observing the proceedings of the scuffle from a small hole on the wall. He walked quietly back to his bed, looked at Zhang Xiaohua who was still sleeping soundly and thought in his heart, “Ignorance is bliss indeed. Is

this what Jianghu is like? To enter such a cruel battle after learning some martial arts? Is this what I wanted?”

Zhang Xiaohu was pondering over these thoughts as he slowly went back to sleep. The other people in the common sleeping area were still discussing with each other, they were too excited and could no longer go back to sleep.

In the morning of the next day, the sky was still dull but Zhang Xiaohua woke up punctually as usual. Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu's sore eyes and the dispirited expressions on the faces of the other travelers, Zhang Xiaohua could guess that something had happened and he asked his second brother, thus learning about the events of the previous night. By the time Zhang Xiaohua went out to search for traces of the scuffle, the streets were already swept clean and there was no longer any evidence of the events during the previous night. Only the single arrow that was stuck on the pillar served as evidence that the fight did happened.

The passengers came from different places to eat a casual breakfast before they returned to their respective rooms.

By the time Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua got on the carriage, they realized that the elderly couple was replaced by a middle-aged well-dressed man.

Under the expert steering of the driver, the interior of the carriage maintained its stability like before. Zhang Xiaohua continued to look at the scenery outside out of boredom while the middle-aged man engaged in some scholarly discussion with the young scholar. However, Zhang Xiaohua could not understand any part of their conversation.

The Zhang Xiaohu who was still excited on the previous day was abnormally quiet that day. Zhang Xiaohua assumed that his second brother did not get a good night sleep, but oblivious to him, Zhang Xiaohu was replaying the scene of the previous night while thinking of Zhang Xiaohua and his future.

Hence, the spacious carriage continued its journey towards Pingyang city in this manner, while the passengers continued to change as they stopped along different towns. From the original passengers, only the two Zhang brothers, the young scholar Li Jinfeng and the bodyguard remained in the same carriage. On this day afternoon, after stopping at another town, the bodyguard said to them

that the town was going to be their last stop before Pingyang city. Hence, when the carriage continued its journey after lunch, it would head straight to Pingyang city and reach their destination in the night.

Chapter 67: Entering the city

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Entering the city

When the carriage began to move off, there were two new additions to the passenger list. One was a gentleman wearing silk while carrying a fan in his hands, looking very suave while the other was a pudgy youth with small beady eyes. The two new passengers were obviously unfamiliar with each other as they looked for their own seats separately.

Like how similar people stick together, the young scholar Li Jinfeng and the silk-robed gentleman clicked together and began chatting not long after the carriage started to move. Hence, the rest of the passengers also got to learn that the silk-robed gentleman was named Shangguan Yun, and he came from Xu town. However, their conversations were not too personal so he did not share his reason for going to Pingyang city. Shangguan Yun appeared to be quite proud as he only spoke to Li Jinfeng while completely ignoring Zhang Xiaohua. Even when he looked at Zhang Xiaohua occasionally, a wrinkle would form between his brows, and even though Zhang Xiaohu was too preoccupied with his thoughts to notice, Zhang Xiaohua could naturally pick up his signals very clearly. It made him wonder as he bent his head to look at his and his brother's clothes, but there did not seem to be anything unusual as they were new clothes their mother had prepared for their journey. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua grew more anxious and his forehead began to perspire.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua would not be able to understand that he and his brother's rural backgrounds were evident from their attire and behavior. Anyone who would observe them for a short while could tell that they were from a remote village, and it was their first time travelling on such a long journey. The previous passengers did not have any outstanding background so they were less

affected by these brothers' companionship, and Li Jinfeng is a scholar who advocates equal treatment and would not show his disdain on his face even if he feels so. However, this Shangguan Yun was different from the rest, even though he was not being intentionally mean and lofty, his wealthy background meant that even his servants were better dressed and mannered than the two Zhang brothers. He had chosen not to use his own carriage to try the commercial carriage for the experience, and upon seeing the two country bumpkin in front of him, he would naturally feel some irritation despite having no ill intent. Hence, his behavior would cause Zhang Xiaohua to be confused.

The pudgy man who was sitting beside could also see Shangguan Yun's expression, and as he looked over to Zhang Xiaohua, he pursed his lips and squint his eyes although one cannot be sure to whom he was disdained of. However, seeing that he has repeatedly tried to enter the conversation between Shangguan Yun and Lin Jinfeng, it was more likely that the pursed lips were meant for Zhang Xiaohua.

Shangguan Yun was chatting with Li Jinfeng, and suddenly he asked, "Brother Li, having stayed in Pingyang city for such a long time, do you know of the Lotus escort?"

Li Jinfeng was surprised and he said, "Of course I do, almost everyone in Pingyang city would have heard of this escort station. They are located in the west of the city, and the place seems to be quite big. I have heard that their influence is widespread, and they have opened many branches across country Yu. Brother Shangguan, why would you suddenly raise them up, do you have any business with them?"

At that moment, the pudgy man who was sitting at a side finally found his chance to interrupt, he cupped his hands and said, "Dare I ask if gentleman Shangguan is also going to Lotus escort for the interview?"

Shangguan Yun looked at the pudgy man in surprise, and asked, "May I know if you are doing so as well?"

The pudgy man said, "I am Yu Lun, and am indeed heading to Lotus escort."

Shangguan Yun smiled as he said, "I did not expect this neighbor to be someone who is on the same road as me, I have failed to pay my respects.

However, has brother Yu ever gone to Lotus escort before?”

Yu Lun replied, “I have been to Pingyang city, but that trip was for leisure so I did not have the opportunity to visit there. When I heard that the Lotus escort was calling for new members, I decided to come along and try my luck to see if I get picked. However, brother Shangguan seems to be quite well-off, may I know why you chose to join this escort business?”

Shangguan smiled bitterly as he answered, “I came here secretly without informing anyone. The people in my household are always forcing me to study literature, but my head would get dizzy when I see those books. A few days ago, one of my subordinates mentioned the Lotus escort to me, and feeling that it is pretty good, I decided to go over and try out as well. Given that I have been taught some martial arts for health since I was young, I think that there should be no problems for me to enter the organization. Once I gain some real ability, I will be able to return home without looking at the faces of those old fogeys at home, and my life would be peaceful from then on.”

After saying this piece, he turned to Li Jinfeng and said urgently as though out of guilt, “Brother Li, I am not putting down any of you scholar-like people, but I never had an interest in books since I was born, I hope you don’t take any offence from my words.”

Li Jinfeng smiled as he said, “Of course not, everyone has his own calling, and there is no problem with just saying.”

However, he was displeased in his heart and thought that they were all a bunch of reckless martial artist wannabes.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohu who was sitting at his corner spoke up and asked, “Excuse me, do you know if this Lotus escort has any relations with the Lu town’s Lotus escort?”

Shangguan Yun maintained his silence so it was Yu Lun who answered him, “This little brother must be from Lu town right, Lotus escort is a very large organization that has many branches in different places, Lu town would naturally have one of their branches as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, “En, I know this, but I have another question.”

Yu Lun smiled as he said, “Little brother can ask as he please and I will try to answer what I know.”

The pudgy man lifted his cheeks and smiled like a well-meaning teacher while Zhang Xiaohua continued to ask, “What does an escort station do?”

“Dang” the pudgy Yu Lun’s head struck on the hood of the carriage and he fell onto the carriage floor.

Li Jinfeng and Shangguan Yun were equally astonished as they looked at Zhang Xiaohua in disbelief. Zhang Xiaohua felt strange and he asked, “What is the matter with you two? Do you not know what an escort station does as well?”

At that moment, the bodyguard who was keeping quiet at a side spoke up, “Little brother must be going out for the first time right.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded while the bodyguard began to explain, “An escort station is where people who know martial arts would gather at, and they either help to deliver valuable goods or act as bodyguards to protect their client.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded despite not understanding the explanation as he thought in his heart, “Hero Wen said that if our household faces any problems, then we can bring the plaque to the Lotus escort in Lu town. I guess that the Lotus escort must have some relations with Piaomiao sect.”

Zhang Xiaohu also felt embarrassed as he watched Zhang Xiaohua asked his questions, but these were also questions on his mind which he did not dare to ask. Since Zhang Xiaohua has asked them, at least he could listen from his side.

At that moment, the pudgy Yu Lun sat back up while Li Jinfeng and Shangguan Yun regained their composure. However, Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “Then are elder brother Shangguan and elder brother Yun going to Lotus escort to become bodyguards?”

The three people lost their bearings again.

Yu Lun laughed as he explained, “Little brother, it is like this. The Lotus escort does not only provide protection services, they would teach their own members martial arts as well. We are going to the Lotus escort to learn martial arts from there.”

Upon hearing his explanation, Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu's eyes brightened as they exchanged glances and thought of the same thing. Zhang Xiaohua asked again, "Elder brother Yu, how does the Lotus escort choose its members?"

Yu Lun replied, "It should include a test of strength, fist and weaponry mastery at a minimum, although I am not too clear of the details myself."

When Zhang Xiaohu heard his answer, he quietly remembered it in his heart.

Shangguan Yun was at the limit of his patience and he said, "Why do you ask so many questions, are you interested in participating yourself?"

Yu Lun said, "Little brother is too young so they will not accept you as a member. However, your elder brother here may try out for their trials."

Zhang Xiaohu asked, "Really?"

Yu Lun blinked his eyes and said, "Yes, you will have no problems."

Zhang Xiaohu was overjoyed and he asked, "In that case, can you bring us along when you go over tomorrow? We are unfamiliar with the place."

Yu Lun smiled as he said, "That is no problem, we can all go together tomorrow."

Then, the three men started discussing about some other topic which Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua could not understand, and the two brothers happily turned their attention to the scenery outside, as though looking forward to the hope that the first ray of sunlight would bring the next day. Unfortunately, they were still inexperienced with the world so they did not notice the frown between Shangguan Yun's brows and the snide in Yu Lun's gaze. Only the bodyguard caught these signals, but when he thought of how this was the two brothers' first trip, it would be natural for them to face some obstacles and since these were not major problems, he decided not to intervene.

The carriage travelled under the darkness of the night towards Pingyang city. Thus, the two Zhang brothers who were looking forward to a view of the city had their hopes extinguished as they could only see the city entrance swallowing the other carriages like a monster's mouth, and the swaying oil lamps outside the doors of the houses along the streets.

The carriage went further into the city for quite a distance before it stopped at a rather remote location. Everyone got off the carriage, and they were indeed greeted by another “Biaochi” carriage station signboard, which meant that they were probably at the Pingyang city branch in the carriage station. It was already very late at night so the carriage station person invited the passengers into the store where they had a casual meal before separating to their respective rooms. The two Zhang brothers naturally chose to sleep in the common sleeping room again, while Zhang Xiaohua did not know where the other three men headed to. Although he wanted to ask about going to Lotus escort together on the next day, the three men appeared exhausted so despite opening his mouth, no words came out of it.

The common sleeping room at the carriage station in Pingyang city was cleaner than the ones in the other towns, and there were fewer fellow travelers as well. After a long day of travelling, Zhang Xiaohua could not resist the temptation as he jumped into bed and fell asleep immediately, while Zhang Xiaohu carefully kept the knapsack and slipped them under his head as a pillow before going to falling into a deep sleep.

In the morning of the next day, the two brothers woke up very early and had their breakfast before waiting outside at the entrance for the other three men to come out. However, after a period of fruitless waiting, the two brothers became anxious and went back into the carriage station to inquire on the three men. Then, they learnt that after Shangguan viewed the rooms, he felt that it was not comfortable enough so he called Yu Lun and Li Jinfeng to find another inn, and hence, this scholar Li Jinfeng’s beat on his chest in guarantee and the pudgy Yu Lun’s mouthful of promises disappeared with the wind. The two brothers exchanged glances as they wondered, how could these people be so flippant with their promises?

The two brothers debated on whether to go Piaomiao sect or Lotus escort, and Zhang Xiaohu made the final decision to go Piaomiao sect, but where was it located at? The two brothers went back to the carriage station to ask for directions, and fortunately the person manning the counter had a good attitude, and the Piaomiao sect’s name was so widespread so they found their answers without much difficulties. It appeared that Piaomiao sect was not located within

the city walls, but were at Piaomiao mountain villa ten li east of the city.

The carriage station was in the west side of the city, so the brothers had to cross the whole city to reach the east entrance. Hence, the two brother left the carriage station after they received specific directions from the man at the counter.

The carriage station was located in a remote corner at the west side of the city, and even though the sun had risen high up into the sky, there were not many people around. After the two brothers walked for quite a distance, crossed an alley and turned at a bend, they involuntarily stopped in their tracks, while Zhang Xiaohua stared at the scene in front of him as he asked Zhang Xiaohu, “Second brother, is it the New Year again?”

Chapter 68: Money pouch

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Money pouch

The scene in front of the two Zhang brothers was a large road two to three times wider than the main road in Lu town. There were innumerable stalls beside the road, and the merchants were calling out continuously to the countless passersby on the street, causing the overall atmosphere to be very lively. It was simply like the New Year bazaar in Lu town to the brothers who have not seen such bustle on normal days, thus they cannot be faulted for their misunderstanding.

Zhang Xiaohu said, "The weather is already so hot, how can it be the New Year?"

Zhang Xiaohua giggled as he replied, "That's right, Pingyang city is so lively, I would not have believed it if I did not see it with my own eyes."

Even though the things in their eyes were fresh and novel, the two brothers have begun traveling for a few days and it was enough for them to realize that there was a world outside the village they were familiar with. Only by gaining more experience and broadening one's horizon could they adapt to their new surroundings. Actually, Zhang Xiaohua could also feel himself becoming more accepting towards the foreign surroundings, and the speed of his comprehension was already beyond a normal thirteen year old child, perhaps this is part of his maturing process.

Zhang Xiaohu was older so he had heard from the people around him of the flourish of the outside world and already had an image of it in his mind. However, his imagination was based on Lu town and the current scene had far exceeded his expectations although he was also able to adapt quickly.

The two brothers walked among the crowd with their hearts full of curiosity, they would look here and there every once in a while. Although they were initially cautious or apprehensive about not fitting in, they soon realized that while there are many people in the crowd with colorful clothes, there were just as many people who wore simple clothes like them. Hence, they did not stand out and some of the merchants would invite them into their shops, which made them relaxed their moods and dropped their guards.

However, they turned dazed again, and why so?

The two brothers were lost, where should they be heading to? It seemed that they have long deviated from the path that was given to them by the man in the carriage station.

Since they were lost, they naturally had to ask someone else for directions.

At that moment, a young man walked from behind and squeezed through the two brothers while saying, "Excuse me, please let me pass."

Upon hearing his voice, Zhang Xiaohua turned his head as a conditioned reflex as he made some space for the passerby. However, at the moment the person went past them, he suddenly extended his hand, swiped it towards Zhang Xiaohu's waist area and took Zhang Xiaohu's tiny money pouch in one smooth motion. Zhang Xiaohu was looking around for a person to ask directions from but Zhang Xiaohua's senses were sharp and he saw everything through the corner of his eye. He immediately stepped forward and pulled the wrist of the hand which was still holding on to the money pouch and said in a sever tone, "What are you doing?"

The young man was about the same age as Zhang Xiaohu and when he saw a child a head shorter than him had obstructed him and even held his wrist, he said casually, "Nothing much."

Zhang Xiaohua asked, "Why are you holding on to my second brother's money pouch?"

The young man sniggered and said, "How did this become your household's money, it is in my hands so it is obviously mine."

After finishing his sentence, he exerted some strength to shrug off Zhang

Xiaohua's grip to pull his hand free. However, Zhang Xiaohua would not let him go as he wished and he pressed on the wrist even harder, "Ouch, ouch" The young man yelped in pain and begged, "Mercy, young master, be lighter, be lighter, my wrist is going to break off."

Zhang Xiaohu noticed the abnormal situation and he snatched the money pouch back from the pickpocket's hand before opening it to check if there were any missing coins. Zhang Xiaohua naturally let go of the hand when he saw his second brother retrieved the money pouch back, but right at that moment, a few people ran into them from behind and bumped into the two brothers. Zhang Xiaohua was irritated, he wondered why there were so many inconsiderate people and what matter could be so urgent, as just as the people disappeared, Zhang Xiaohua realized that the pickpocket had also vanished. The two brothers exchanged glances and they both realized that the people from behind must have been the pickpocket's accomplices. Zhang Xiaohu checked his body again and seeing that nothing was missing this time, the two brothers let go of the incident from their minds.

However, this incident made the two brothers more wary towards the strangers in the city, they even approached a kind looking granny to get directions. After finding their way again, the two brothers continued in their journey. However, Pingyang city was larger than the normal standards, and after walking for an incense stick worth of time and not reaching the east entrance, the two brothers were not tired but the weather was too hot and they had to squeeze through the crowd so they were extremely thirsty. When they walked to a corner, they were overjoyed to see a stall which sold cooling tea for one copper per bowl. Just as they were about to walk towards the stall, Zhang Xiaohua tugged Zhang Xiaohu and pointed to a person while speaking softly, "Second brother, look at that person, isn't he the pickpocket who tried to steal our money just now?"

Zhang Xiaohu studied the person before he shook his head, "I can't tell, I did not notice his features when he stole our money just now, and he ran away before I could get a second look."

Zhang Xiaohua said with confidence, "I am certain that he is the right one."

Zhang Xiaohu asked suspiciously, "Are you sure, do not malign a good person."

Furthermore, we do not have any evidence to apprehend him.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he said, “Second brother, look at what he is planning to do, staring at the lady’s money pouch like that.”

Zhang Xiaohua turned again to look, and indeed, there was a lady walking in front of the young man while carrying a pot of some unknown flower using both her hands. Her emerald-green money pouch was swaying on her waist as she moved, and wasn’t that young man staring at it right now?

Right at that moment, the young man increased his pace, and Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly threw his knapsack onto Zhang Xiaohu while he said, “Help me hold this, second brother, and watch how I foil his thievery.”

Just then, the pickpocket had reached the lady’s side and with a swipe of his hand, the emerald-green money pouch was in his hands and he immediately started running away. The lady could feel his actions and she shouted anxiously, “My money pouch, you nasty thief.”

However, her hands were full with the flower pot so how could she chase after him? Thus, she quickened her steps as she muttered under her breath, “I will let you hold on to it for now, just wait until third uncle takes care of you.”

While the lady was in a fluster, the Zhang Xiaohua who would act when he saw an injustice ran over and said, “Wait a moment, I will get it back for you.”

After finishing his sentence, he ran towards the direction of the thief while shouting, “You nasty thief.”

The thief heard the commotion behind him and turned around to look, so it was the child who caught his wrist earlier on. While thinking of the bruise that was about to form on his wrist, the thief increased his pace in order to shake Zhang Xiaohua off.

In the thief’s mind, Zhang Xiaohua was just another brat who had abnormal strength. He thought that the boy could not possibly run faster than an adult, and will soon be left in the dust.

However, Zhang Xiaohua just had to be the exception. The thief was feeling tired after being chased past several streets and when he turned around to look at his pursuer, he saw Zhang Xiaohua still running energetically and the distance

between them was even closing up. Looking at his surrounds, he realized that he had already ran too far for his accomplices to catch up, and despite feeling some reluctance, he threw the money pouch in his hands into an alley while he sped off in the other direction. When Zhang Xiaohua chased up to here, he could only pick up the money pouch first and by the time he left the alley, the thief had already disappeared without a trace.

Nevertheless, Zhang Xiaohua's aim had been the money pouch from the start. Hence, he retraced his steps and finally saw the lady still waiting at her original position.

Upon receiving the money pouch back from Zhang Xiaohua, the lady smiled and said, "Thank you."

Seeing the lady who hair was combed into pigtails and was dressed in scarlet and green, Zhang Xiaohua's face turned slightly red as he quickly said, "It is no problem, he had tried to steal our things earlier. However, he was very crafty and had managed to get away."

The lady replied, "It is alright, what is most important is that I got my money back. Thank you again, I will make a move first as someone is still waiting for me."

After finishing her sentence, she flashed one final smile to Zhang Xiaohua before turning to the east.

Zhang Xiaohu had also walked over and he smiled and praised Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, you sure are amazing to be able to get the money back. However, you are still young and not his match if it turned into a fight, so let me chase if there is a next time."

Zhang Xiaohua took back his knapsack and said, "It is no problem, second brother, I also feel that I am quite amazing now. Despite running for so long, I don't feel the least tired."

Zhang Xiaohu thought that his youngest brother was boasting and he played along, "Yes, Xiaohua has grown up so of course he has become amazing."

The two brothers laughed as they turned to the east and coincidentally, they were behind the lady.

After walking for a while, the lady turned her head and saw the two brothers walking behind her so she stopped in her tracks and waited for them to catch up before asking, “It seems that we are going the same way, where are you guys heading towards?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “We want to go to Piaomiao mountain villa.”

“Piaomiao mountain villa?” The lady was astonished, “What do you want to do there?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “We want to learn martial arts from there.”

“Learn martial arts? From Piaomiao sect?” The lady grew even more surprised. “I did not hear that the Piaomiao sect is recruiting new disciples again.”

However, the lady continued to say, “There is still some distance from here to Piaomiao sect, how do you plan to go there? On foot?”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned slightly red as he said, “Yes, it is our first time so we are not sure on how we should go there.”

The lady smiled back as she said, “In that case, since I am travelling to somewhere close by, you can follow me and I will send you there. Just treat it as repayment for the money pouch, what do you think?”

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed and he said, “Yes, thank you”

Indeed, there was a carriage somewhere not too far in front of them, and there were already quite a few flower pots loaded inside. However, there was still some additional space so the lady and two Zhang brothers got on the carriage before it started to move.

While sitting on the carriage, the three people chatted and got to know each other better. They learnt each other names, and Zhang Xiaohua found out that the lady’s was Qiu Tong who was from a mountain villa and had come to the city to buy some flowers to beautify the villa. They did not discuss much else, instead, the two brothers listened as Qiu Tong shared about the interesting places and matters in Pingyang city.

Chapter 69: Escort station

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Escort station

Piaomiao sect was indeed far, after the carriage exited the city, it headed towards the east for the time it takes for an incense stick to burn before it reached a large highway where it finally stopped and the three passengers got off.

Qiu Tong pointed towards the highway and said, "Continue walking straight ahead, Piaomiao sect's mountain villa is after the highway, I cannot bring you any further than this. I live in Huanxi mountain villa, you can come over and find me when you have the chance."

Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu expressed their gratitude before Qiu Tong got back on the carriage which turned around and headed back. Qiu Tong waved at the two brothers from the carriage as they left.

On seeing the expansive highway and the enormous trees beside, the two Zhang brothers could not help but feel solemn as they took a deep sigh and started walking towards their destination.

Not long after, they could see a large signboard from afar, as they got closer, they could make out the two words "Piaomiao" resting on the tall entrance. Weren't they the words on the plaque?

Their heartbeats quickened as they could see hope in front of them.

Under the signboard were a few men carrying blades, and a person who was probably the leader walking to and fro. It was already noon by then, and the sun shone mercilessly on the two brothers who were alone on the wide highway. Hence, they were already spotted from afar, and seeing the two brothers continued to walk towards them, someone went over and extended his right arm

out to prevent them from advancing. His gaze was upon their two figures as he studied the two strangers, and he said, “The two of you please stop in your tracks, ahead of you is our sect grounds.”

Zhang Xiaohu stepped forward and cupped his fist. He said, “May I know if this is Piaomiao sect’s mountain villa?”

The person looked at Zhang Xiaohu suspiciously and replied, “Indeed this is Piaomiao sect’s mountain villa.”

Zhang Xiaohu was overjoyed and he said, “That is great, we are looking for Piaomiao sect’s mountain villa.”

The guard took a step back in caution and asked, “May I know what business you have with us?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “We came here to join Piaomiao sect and learn martial arts.”

The person was surprised as though what he heard was a joke, and he looked at Zhang Xiaohu before turning back to the other guards behind him. The other guards also looked incredulously at the two visitors.

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “What is the problem? We came from Lu town to join Piaomiao sect and learn martial arts.”

The person could no longer control his temperament, he hugged his stomach and burst out in laughter while pointing to the two brothers and said, “Join Piaomiao sect? The two of you? Hahaha.....”

The other guards also started laughing until their backs bent, and some were even rolling on the floor, as though they just heard the world’s funniest joke.

The two Zhang brothers could not understand their humor, thus they stood there silently until the guards laughed their fill before asking carefully, “Why are you laughing?”

His words brought another bout of laughter from the guards, but this time, the guard leader responded, “Yet another two worms attracted by the allure of Jianghu.”

Then, he shoed them with his hands and said, “Piaomiao sect has already

recruited some disciples not long ago. We are not recruiting anymore so the two of you should just go home.”

Zhang Xiaohua became anxious and he said, “We came all the way from Lu town, and journeyed for several days by carriage and spent a lot of money, how can you just chase us back?”

Zhang Xiaohu was also shocked, he had not expected the other party to reject them from learning martial arts, what should he do now?

Suddenly, Zhang Xiaohu thought of an idea and he said to the guard leader, “This elder brother, I am acquaintances with hero Wen, Wen Wenhai. Can you let us in to meet him?”

The guard leader looked at him as he replied, “Our Piaomiao sect indeed has a disciple by this name, but there are many people who has heard of him as well. How does this prove that he knows you?”

Zhang Xiaohu listened strangely and he said, “You can tell him that we are the Zhang brothers from Lu town, I trust that he will have some impression of us.”

The guard leader said, “A pity, even if hero Wen knows you, I still cannot let you in because he is not in the sect right now.”

Zhang Xiaohu felt a wave of disappointment, but Zhang Xiaohua interrupted, “What about hero Lu, Lu Yueming?”

The guard leader continued, “Ah, you do know quite a bit. However, hero Lu is not in the sect at the moment as well, and even if you know them, they will not let you join our sect to learn martial arts. Thus, you should obediently go back to where you came from and live your days farming in the fields.”

The guard leader’s gaze was sharp and incisive, he could recognize their origins immediately.

The two Zhang brothers wanted to say something else, but the guard leader interrupted them and said, “This is the mountain villa of Piaomiao sect, and we have always prohibited strangers from entering our grounds. Right now is a sensitive period for us, and I should not even explain all these things to you, so you should stop wasting our time and leave sooner.”

The two brothers felt dejected upon hearing his words, and without a choice, they turned back and walked away dispiritedly.

Just at that moment, one of the guard said softly to the guard leader, “Header, these two people could name two of our core disciples so easily, what if they really do recognize them? Even though joining our sect to learn martial arts is impossible, if those people know that we chased off some of the acquaintances, won’t we be in trouble?”

The guard leader started to frown, and another guard came forward and said, “Aren’t the Lotus escort are looking for near recruits? We can direct them over, and if they fail the test, they can just head home after that. If those core disciples learn of this, at least they cannot blame us for doing anything wrong.”

Upon hearing these, the guard leader nodded and his eyes brightened. He said, “Your words make sense, I guess it is still you who have the better brain.”

After saying that, the guard leader rushed forward towards the two Zhang brothers and shouted, “These two brothers, wait a moment.”

Just as Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua were walking back dejectedly, they heard the voice calling them and stopped their footsteps. Zhang Xiaohua asked, “What is the matter, are you letting us in?”

The guard leader laughed as he said, “Letting you join our sect is impossible, but I can give you some directions if the two of you are looking to learn martial arts.”

Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu’s eyes brightened and they asked in unison, “What directions?”

The guard leader continued, “There is a place called Lotus escort in Pingyang city. They are currently recruiting so the both of you can try out. If you pass their selections, there will naturally be someone who will teach you martial arts.”

On a listen, they realized that it was the place Shangguan Yun and Yu Lun were planning to go, it seemed that Yu Lun was telling the truth. While trying to find Piaomiao sect in the morning, they had left the matter at the back of their heads, but it seemed that they would have to go back to that option.

The two brothers hurriedly thank the guard leader for his suggestion, and

asked for specific directions to the Lotus escort before they waved goodbye and left.

It was already afternoon by then, and the sun was beginning to set. They had long digested their breakfast, and Zhang Xiaohua was hungry to the point of dizziness. Zhang Xiaohu was not any better, but fortunately there were some houses in front of the Piaomiao sect mountain, and quite a few households making a living there. The two brothers found a small shop and had a casual meal there.

When they came, they took the carriage and even though the trip was long, there was someone to chat to so they did not get bored. However, on their return trip on foot, they were walking one behind the other. When there was some shade, the trip was still bearable, when they had to walk under the sun, it became hot and more exhausting. There were not many people that travelled the road between Pingyang city and Piaomiao sect, and those few with carriages were in too much of a hurry to bother giving those two brothers a ride back into the city.

By the time the two brothers reached within view of Pingyang city, their backs were completely wet with sweat. However, upon seeing the city entrance, their spirits improved and pace increased.

Fortunately, the Lotus escort station was close to the city entrance and many people were able to provide them directions. Not long after, the two brothers found themselves in front of a large door.

The door was very big and two lion statues were placed at each of its sides, making it look majestic. There was a black signboard hung outside, and four words written in gold. Zhang Xiaohua could only recognize the second word “hua (flower)”, and he guessed that the words were probably “Lotus escort station”.

There were also some people standing at the door, but they were dressed in cloths and there were no blades on their waist. When the two brothers walked up the steps, one of the guards immediately walked up to them, but upon seeing the attire of the two brothers, his brows wrinkled slightly although he maintained his smile and asked, “May I know if these two brothers are looking for a bodyguard or requesting to make a delivery?”

Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohu had heard of the jobs that escort stations take up from Yu Lun so he did not make a fool of himself. Instead, he cupped his fists and said politely that the two brothers are here to learn martial arts from the Lotus escort.”

The person studied Zhang Xiaohu from head to toe, nodded his head and said, “Wait a moment.”

Then, he turned around and shouted to the people behind, “Little four, come over and bring these two to the testing room, they are here to learn martial arts.”

A lean but sharp looking person made a sound in acknowledgment and ran over to bring the two brothers through the big door.

After stepping through the door, there was a large spacious field with many weapons placed at a side, while some stone weights and other things were put at another corner. The sun was still very strong and there were not much people in the field, so the people who came to learn martial arts were probably still resting indoors.

The attendant led the Zhang brothers to a row of rooms on the right of the field, walked to the second door and knocked slightly. After a short while, a hoarse voice came from inside saying, “Who is it, come in.”

The attendant opened the door and brought the Zhang brothers into the room, the room was similar to a study room and there was a forty plus years old man sitting behind the study desk. The man was dressed like a scholar, and his eyes were slightly puffy as though he had just woken up.

The person who was woken up forcibly was naturally not good-tempered, he asked unhappily, “Little four, what is the matter?”

The attendant hurriedly smile in apology and said, “Uncle Wen, these two are here to learn martial arts, can you arrange it for them?”

Uncle Wen heard his answer and motioned him to leave, while saying, “Understood, you can go.”

The attendant smiled and said, “I will have to trouble Uncle Wen then. I shall take my leave now.”

Before he left, he turned towards Zhang Xiaohu and said, "This person is fourth uncle Wen who is in charge of Lotus escort's martial artist new intakes, both of you just follow his arrangements."

Zhang Xiaohu cupped his fists in thanks and the attendant stepped out while closing door before he left.

Fourth uncle Wen looked at the attire of the two brothers and wrinkled his brow. Nevertheless, he took a book from the table and flipped it open, asked for the two brothers' names and wrote on the book, before asking, "Do you want to stay in the escort station or outside?"

Zhang Xiaohu said, "Of course we choose to stay in the escort station."

Fourth uncle Wen nodded his head and said, "Alright, the tuition for learn martial arts for a year is fifty taels of silver, food and lodging is thirty taels of silver. Since there are two of you, it will be a total of a hundred and sixty taels of silver, please bring the money out now."

Upon hearing, Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua became dumbstruck.

Chapter 70: Test

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Test

“Sivers?” The two brothers exclaimed in unison, “Learning martial arts requires us to pay silvers?” Upon hearing their response, fourth uncle Wen’s face had a complete turnabout and he plopped the brush onto the desk.

He said angrily, “Who is willing to teach you if you don’t pay silvers? Are the two of you trying to make a fool of me?”

The Zhang brothers immediately denied, and Zhang Xiaohu recounted the information which the guards from Piaomiao sect has passed to him before fourth uncle Wen’s anger subsided. The latter picked up the tea cup from his table and drank a sip of water before he said, “It seems that the men at the door have made a mistake, so you cannot be blamed for this.”

Zhang Xiaohu asked curiously, “May I ask fourth uncle, where did we do wrong?”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohu’s polite manner, fourth uncle Wen cleared his throat and assumed an example of a good teacher as he explained, “Seeing that you came from afar, I will explain it to you simply.”

“The people who come to us to learn martial arts would have to pay tuition fees, and if they choose to live within the station, they would naturally have to pay lodging fees as well. Our Lotus escort is the largest escort station in Pingyang city, so we do not just provide escort services but function as a school for martial arts on normal days. However, you should not have gone to Piaomiao sect to learn martial arts. The people we are recruiting can be of any age as long as they have the right aptitude and talent in martial arts, but the most suitable age to start learning martial arts is at five to six years old, because any older would lead

to obstacles in higher levels. Our martial division would only teach normal martial arts so we do not have any age limit, but the Piaomiao sect disciples are only chosen from children between five to six years old. Going there to learn martial arts would only result in a fruitless trip.”

After listening up to here, the expression on the two Zhang brothers’ faces changed. They initially thought that they could reside in Lotus escort for a short period or pledge themselves to Piaomiao sect, but it seemed that their thoughts were far too simple.

Zhang Xiaohua asked urgently, “Fourth uncle, then what did the guard in the mountain villa mean when he asked me to come here?”

Fourth uncle Wen smiled as he stroke his beard. He said, “Apart from functioning as a martial school, our Lotus escort has the primary business of an escort station. During this period, our escort station is facing a shortage in manpower so we are recruiting some people as delivery men and bodyguards. I believe that is what he was referring to.”

Zhang Xiaohu asked again, “Then must we pay money to do so?”

Fourth uncle Wen replied, “Delivering items and protecting people are our livelihood, of course there is no need to pay us, and instead you can receive a monthly stipend.”

Zhang Xiaohu asked, “Then can we learn martial arts?”

Fourth uncle Wen replied, “Yes, doing these tasks would require you to know some self-defense, how can you do them without knowing any martial arts?”

Light immediately shone from Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes, to be able to learn martial arts while earning some money on the side, it seemed to be the perfect outcome.

However, the next words of fourth uncle Wen made their dreams collapsed, “However, we will still require you to have some foundations in martial arts. Have you learnt martial arts before?”

Zhang Xiaohu pursed his lips and said in a low voice, “No.”

Fourth uncle Wen’s face immediately sunk, he said, “How can the Piaomiao

sect guards make such a mess of things? They should have checked your backgrounds more carefully and sent you home straightaway.” Then, his eyes suddenly gleamed in enlightenment and he asked, “Where did you come from?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “Lu town.”

Fourth uncle Wen mumbled, “Lu town, Lu town, I have never heard of any disciple who lived in Lu town.” He then asked again, “Lu town is very far from here, how you learned of Piaomiao sect?”

Zhang Xiaohu only explained that he had met Wen Wenhai and Lu Yueming, and did not elaborate any further.

The wrinkle between fourth uncle Wen’s brows finally smoothened as he understood the intentions of the guards.

He immediately said pleasantly, “Since that is the case, you can try going over to the delivery division. Without any martial arts background, you can definitely dream on about being a bodyguard, but as a delivery man, there may still be some hope for you. Come, this old man is currently free so I will bring you to Old sixth Li’s place for a trip.”

After finishing his sentence, he got up and brought the two brothers out, causing the latter two to feel surprised.

Fourth uncle Wen brought the Zhang brothers to the fourth room beside his, and made them wait outside the door for a while as he entered first. A skinny man around thirty years of age was inside the room smoking on a pipe and when he saw fourth uncle Wen enter, he smiled and asked, “What has brought fourth uncle Wen over at this time?”

Upon seeing the room full of smoke, fourth uncle Wen walked to the window and pushed it open, used his hands to wave off the smoke in his eyes and said, “Old sixth Li, will you die if you smoke two less puffs, the whole room is full of smoke, who would want to come over?”

Then, he asked, “How has your recruitment been going? Have you gotten all the needed manpower?”

Old sixth Li picked up his pipe, tapped it on the ashtray at the stool beside and said, “The recruitment is almost done, we just need one or two more in the

bodyguard division. The delivery division brought me some trouble, almost all feel that the money is too little and the job too risky, and those with a little bit of martial arts foundation would apply to be a bodyguard, and those without any would rather be a carriage bodyguard, and in any case would be more popular than being a delivery man.”

Fourth uncle Wen smiled and he said, “Just as well.”

Then, he turned around and invited the Zhang brothers to enter the room. He said to Zhang Xiaohu, “This is old sixth Li who is in charge of the delivery division recruitment. Introduce yourselves.”

Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua stepped forward hurriedly and send their greetings.

Old sixth Li looked at Zhang Xiaohu, then looked curiously at fourth uncle Wen and said, “What show are you performing here? You want him to be a delivery man?”

Fourth uncle Wen nodded so old sixth Li studied Zhang Xiaohu from head to toe, and asked, “From your appearance, it seems that you have never trained in martial arts before, am I right?”

Zhang Xiaohu answered respectfully, “Yes, I have no experience.”

Old sixth Li looked curiously at fourth uncle Wen and said, “Without any experience, what do you want me to do? There are still some dangers in delivery jobs, it is a job that endangers life. Have you not explained to him clearly yet?”

Fourth uncle Wen smiled as he said, “Delivery jobs are not as dangerous as bodyguard jobs, so not knowing any martial arts is still fine, I am aware of all these. He simply wants to learn some martial arts, and furthermore...”

Fourth uncle Wen then stooped over to old sixth Li’s ear and whispered some sentences while the latter nodded his head continuously. However, he maintained his position and repeated, “Even though martial arts experience is not a must for delivery jobs, there is still some physical requirement and martial arts talent. If not, I will not be able to account to those few people.”

Fourth uncle Wen smiled as he said, “They all grew up on the fields, so there should be no problems meeting the physical requirements. You can bring him to

the training field to test his aptitude, and it is best if he passes. If not, you can explain to him clearly that he cannot risk his life just to learn martial arts.”

Turning his head to Zhang Xiaohu, he said, “Don’t you agree?”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head like a pestle on a mortar.

Seeing that he has no other choice, old sixth Li said to Zhang Xiaohu, “Alright, follow me.”

After finishing his sentence, he brought Zhang Xiaohu to the field outside the room. At that moment, there were already some people training their martial arts, some were practicing their fists and kicks, others were waving the weapons about, and there were even some people carrying the stone weights to train their strength. Old sixth Li brought Zhang Xiaohu to beside the stone weights where the people who were training immediately put their weights down and bowed respectfully towards the former.

Then, old sixth Li pointed a stone weight and said to Zhang Xiaohu, “This is a hundred jin* stone weight, can you lift it up?”

Zhang Xiaohu shook his head and replied, “I do not know, I have never tried it before.”

Old sixth Li said, “Then go ahead and try.”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head and walked to the front, used his two hands to hold the stone weight, adjusted his body and took a deep breath. Then, following the previous actions of the people who were training, he used a single hand and lifted the stone weight above his head before putting it down and looking back at old sixth Li. The latter nodded his head and said, “That is fine, this is a hundred and fifty jin weight, you try lifting it again.”

Zhang Xiaohu looked at the slightly stone weight and he lifted it up again. However, there was some sweat that appeared on his forehead, and old sixth Li appeared to be slightly pleased. The people who were standing at the side while looking at scene became slightly serious. After all Zhang Xiaohu was still young and his body did not appear to be the muscular type, so to be able to lift a hundred and fifty jin without any formal training was considered to be pretty good. Old sixth Li did not stop there and pointed to another weight as he said,

“This is a two hundred jin weight, you try to lift it again.”

This time, the people at the side became surprised. Although this two hundred jin stone weight was not the heaviest one in the training field, not many people were able to lift it up the moment they entered. Only a few muscular recruits were able to lift it up, and other had to undergo training and use all their strength before they could lift it. To allow Zhang Xiaohu to try, this old sixth Li was obviously trying to test the limits of Zhang Xiaohu’s strength.

Zhang Xiaohu was like a newborn calf, he was unafraid as he went forward to feel the weight. However, as he thought of his future, he took a deep breath like before and exerted the strength in his arm to lift it up. Unfortunately, just as the weight was about to go past his head level, his arm softened and the stone weight dropped onto the ground. Zhang Xiaohu’s face was slightly pale, but the surrounding people were calling out praises and some even clapped their hands. Old sixth Li nodded his head and smiled, saying, “Not bad, good job.”

At this time, Zhang Xiaohu realized that he should have passed the test on strength.

Old sixth Li asked Zhang Xiaohu again, “You truly have not learnt any martial arts before?”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded in agreement.

At that moment, the people who were training on the field got attracted to the sounds of applause and they walked over. Old sixth Li pointed towards a youth roughly the same age as Zhang Xiaohu and said, “Little monkey, come over and demonstrate the complete ‘sixth fist’ once.”

Then, he turned his head and said to Zhang Xiaohu, “Observe carefully, you will have to demonstrate it once to me after he is done.”

The sixth fist was a set of simple entry level fist martial art, and under little monkey’s display, it appeared to be mighty and forceful. Zhang Xiaohu heightened his concentration as he watched each movement and each stroke, and after little monkey finished his demonstration, the surrounding spectators broke into applause again.

Old sixth Li looked at Zhang Xiaohu while the latter closed his eyes and thought

recalling the previous scene. After a short while, he slowly performed the set of actions from the first stance. Even though he could not display the same amount of force, his strokes were as precise as the demonstrator's, and the more strokes he performed, the more surprised old sixth Li turned. The spectators were also dazed as they watch him perform up to the sixth or seventh out of ten stances of the fist martial art before Zhang Xiaohu scratched his head and said apologetically, "I have forgotten the rest."

Old sixth Li asked severely, "Be honest with me, do you really have no martial experience? You have not learnt this fist martial art before?"

Chapter 71: Solve

Translator : Casualtranslator

Sry kinda late.....Last chapter of the day

Enjoy

Solve

Zhang Xiaohu replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "Of course, I have not learnt this before. This is my first time doing this fist martial art."

Old sixth Li was slightly agitated; he said, "Incredible, even though you cannot be counted as a genius, your talent is rare enough. The sixth fist is a complicated set of martial arts stances, but you could remember sixty to seventy percent on your first try, this is indeed pretty rare."

The spectators at the side were also calling out in praises.

All this made Zhang Xiaohu's face red in embarrassment, while Zhang Xiaohua was also feeling happy for his second brother. However, the latter also felt worried inside, as he did not think that he could remember as much as his brother, and wondered if he could pass the test when it was his turn.

Old sixth Li laughed as he said to Zhang Xiaohu, "Come over, let me feel your bones and physical condition."

Zhang Xiaohu obediently went over, while old sixth Li touched and knocked on different spots all over his body before saying in a satisfied tone, "Very good, this body is suitable to learn martial arts. If your age was not too old, you might have even entered Piaomiao sect."

Zhang Xiaohu's smile blossomed like a flower across his face and asked, "Does that mean that I have passed the test and can be assigned to be a delivery hand?"

Old sixth Li smiled and said, "Pass, of course you have passed. After training for

half a year, you may even be qualified to become a bodyguard.”

He turned his head to fourth uncle Wen and said, “Fourth uncle has such a good eye to bring this talent into our escort station.”

Fourth uncle Wen replied humbly, “You praise me too much.”

Old sixth Li said to Zhang Xiaohu, “Alright, come along with me to register. From henceforth, you are part of our Lotus escort delivery division. The rest of you can disperse and continue with your own training.”

After finishing his sentence, he turned around to leave while the spectators began to scatter back to their respective trainings.

At that moment, a voice sounded out, “What is going on? Why don’t you test me as well?”

Everyone stopped in their tracks, old sixth Li turned and look, the voice came from Zhang Xiaohua. Zhang Xiaohu urgently continued, “Yes, my brother has not been tested yet, does he not need to be tested?”

Old sixth Li studied Zhang Xiaohua and asked, “How old are you?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered carefully, “Thirteen years old.”

Old sixth Li smiled while the other spectators burst into peals of laughter. Old sixth Li then asked, “Did you know that there is a minimum age requirement for Lotus escort personnel?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head.

Old sixth Li continued to explain, “Our Lotus escort has to run a business, so all our personnel have to be adults. Our youngest delivery hand has to be at least sixteen years old. Look at your surroundings, do you see any children your age?”

Zhang Xiaohua studied his surroundings and indeed, the people around were all at least twenty years old, Zhang Xiaohu and little monkey were the youngest of the bunch.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but lament at the heavens on playing a prank on him. The Piaomiao sect new recruits had to be around five to six years of age which he is too old for, and after finding the Lotus escort, they had a minimum age requirement of sixteen and above so he was too young. This,

this, what should he do about him, why was it so difficult to learn martial arts?”

However, he did not extinguish his hope, he said loudly, “I may be young, but my strength is not small at all. Why don’t you let me lift the weights and see how much I can carry?”

Old sixth Li maintained his position and shook his head. He said, “It is not that I do not want you, but how can you contribute to our escort station if you are too young to even take care of yourself? Escort stations have our own rules, how can I break them just for you?”

After finishing his sentence, he turned around and continued to leave, but Zhang Xiaohu pulled him from the side and begged, “Old sixth Li, Xiaohua’s strength is really strong, why don’t you take a look first?”

Zhang Xiaohua was so anxious that he was close to tears, and he would have started crying if he had not sworn in front of his grandmother’s gravesite to not cry again.

Seeing that his second brother had held back old sixth Li, he immediately ran over towards the stone weights. He ran to beside the two hundred jin weight that his brother could not carry and said, “Look, I will try to carry this.”

Then, he lifted the weight single-handedly and in one motion lifted it to above his head.

Old sixth Li was initially displeased when he was pulled back by Zhang Xiaohu, and just as he was about to shake himself free, he saw Zhang Xiaohua lift the two hundred jin stone weight and was dumbstruck.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw the former remained quiet, he thought that the weight was probably too light so he quickly put the two hundred jin stone weight down and went over to the largest stone weight, gripped it, took a deep breath and shouted aloud, “Lift”. Then, he lifted up the largest stone weight with a single arm.

Right at that moment, the training field was as quiet as a graveyard, all the spectators were stunned to the spot, their eyes were scattered over the ground and their mouths were opened as if a large duck egg was in their mouth.

After half a bell of time, someone started asking, “That, that stone weight,

isn't it the five hundred jin stone weight?"

At that moment, a solemn voice rang from behind, "What are you all doing over there? Instead of practicing diligently, you have all crowded together to watch a show."

At the same time, a female voice also rang, "Eh, Zhang Xiaohua? Why are you here?"

Everyone turned their heads to look, and an old man with a head full of white hair was walking on the corridor. The spectators muttered to each other, "Third master Qu is here, let's go back."

Thus, the surrounding spectators dispersed without hesitation, leaving behind the small lone body which was still lifting the stone weight, while the face had turned red.

The lady who was walking beside third master Qu turned out to be Qiu Tong whom they met in Pingyang city in the morning.

Third master Qu walked over to old sixth Li's side, while old sixth Li and fourth uncle Wen immediately greeted the former and were greeted back in return. Then, he turned to Zhang Xiaohua who was still lifting the stone weight and wrinkled his brow. He said, "What are you doing, why have you not put it down?"

Zhang Xiaohua did not know who the speaker was and he did not dare to put it down. Instead, he looked at old sixth Li who urgently said, "Put it down, put it down quickly."

Only then did Zhang Xiaohua loosened his grip and threw the stone weight onto the ground. The stone weight fell with a loud "Peng" sound and stirred up a large dump of dirt.

Third master Qu turned to Qiu Tong and asked, "You know them?"

Qiu Tong smiled as she replied, "Yes, remember what I just told you about a boy who got back my money pouch in the morning, he is called Zhang Xiaohua and his elder brother is Zhang Xiaohu."

Third master Qu smiled and nodded, "Good boy."

Then, he asked old sixth Li, “What is going on? Why are we letting a child lift weights?”

Old sixth Li respectfully explained the events from the beginning, and said at the end, “Zhang Xiaohua’s strength is truly abnormal. There are not many people in our Lotus escort who can lift this stone weight up. However, he is too young, and it is against the rules to accept him, so I would leave everything up to third master’s decision.”

When third master Qu heard that Zhang Xiaohua has lifted the five hundred jin stone weight, he was also astonished and he could not help but look at the stone weight which was thrown carelessly aside and the short child beside it.

Qiu Tong was also encouraging on the side, she said, “Xiaohua is a good boy. If not for him, my money pouch would have been stolen this morning, and although we could have gotten it back like third master has said, I still owe him a favor. So why don’t you make an exception, third master.”

Third master Qu smiled as he said, “Look at this lass, you are so muddleheaded. Despite knowing that the Piaomiao sect only accepts five to six year old children, you still brought them to the mountain entrance and left them there without caring. Our escort station only accepts delivery hands who are at least sixteen years old, aren’t you putting me in a difficult situation now?”

Qiu Tong smiled as she said, “They did not say that they wanted to learn martial arts then, so I thought they were visiting relatives from within the sect. Furthermore, isn’t everything in Lotus escort under your jurisdiction, your words is enough to change the rules.”

Third master Qu said, “Even if I am in charge, these rules were decided by the sect, how can I bend them so easily? Furthermore, a delivery hand has to face danger, how can a child do all that? Won’t I be harming him instead by putting him in danger?”

Qiu Tong lowered her head and pondered, the former’s words were true, so she could only look at Zhang Xiaohua pitifully.

Third master Qu continued, “However, I have the perfect solution, would you like to listen to it?”

Qiu Tong was surprised, “Perfect solution?”

Third master Qu said, “Didn’t you say that the person who looked after the medicinal fields on the mountain had a relative who passed away recently, and there is no one to apply the fertilizers onto the herbs so you wanted me to find someone who knows how to tend the fields and have good strength? Isn’t this boy in front of us the perfect candidate? Since all he wants is to learn martial arts, you can just find someone from the mountain villa to teach him right? At the very most, you can draw some time out for him to come over here and practice martial arts as well.”

Qiu Tong’s eye brightened as she agreed.

Qiu Tong then called Zhang Xiaohua over and explained the situation to him in detail. She asked if he knew how to work on the fields, and Zhang Xiaohua naturally nodded his head and agreed, it was a joke to be even asked since his profession was a farmer, how could he not know how to farm? Furthermore, what other choices did Zhang Xiaohua have? Piaomiao sect was unwilling to accept him, Lotus escort as well, since he could still learn martial arts on Huanxi mountain villa and his duty was to simply work in the fields, why would he not be agreeable?

After hearing that the pay to stay on Huanxi mountain villa was five coins per month, he immediately became overjoyed. Zhang Xiaohu could only earn six coins a month while risking his life, yet he was only working on the fields and was able to earn that much money, how could he not be happy?

The only thing he minded was that he would be in Huanxi mountain villa while his second brother would be in Lotus escort, so they could not see each other as often.

Zhang Xiaohu who was at a side also overheard the conversation and he asked Qiu Tong, “What kind of place is Huanxi mountain villa?”

Qiu Tong smiled as she replied, “It is right beside Piaomiao sect mountain, didn’t I say that sending you to Piaomiao sect was along the way?”

Zhang Xiaohu said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Xiaohua, you can see that the escort station is not too far from Huanxi mountain villa, I will come to visit you when I have the time. It is also not dangerous over there so our parents will be relieved,

and when you grow older after a few years, you can come over to the escort station with me.”

Zhang Xiaohua saw that his second brother was agreeable as well so he agreed to the arrangements. Qiu Tong was happy as well, after crossing paths with Zhang Xiaohua in the morning, she felt as if she gained a younger brother who could even help her with her work, so it was the perfect outcome to her.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua separated at the escort station. On one side, old sixth Li took Zhang Xiaohu to his room to settle some administrative details and prepare his lodgings, while third master Qu requested him to pay special attention to Zhang Xiaohu after learning of the latter’s results from earlier. He said that perhaps in the future, Zhang Xiaohu could become a pillar of the escort station, so they should invest more in his training.

On the other side, Zhang Xiaohua took his knapsack and followed Qiu Tong up onto the carriage as they headed towards the east entrance of the city.

Chapter 72: Entering the villa

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Entering the villa

While sitting on the carriage and looking at the somewhat familiar scenery, Zhang Xiaohua felt as though he was still dreaming. That was the third time he travelled on the same road, but the first time without his second brother Zhang Xiaohu. As he looked at Qiu Tong who was sitting beside him, he felt that fate was really extraordinary.

If the thief had not stolen from Qiu Tong, and if he had run any bit slower and not get the money pouch back and thus become acquainted with this elder sister Qiu Tong, then he would probably be on the journey back to Lu town. After all, he was not accepted in Piaomiao sect and Lotus escort, and he could not possibly hold his second brother back from his promising future.

Thinking of Zhang Xiaohu, the edges of Zhang Xiaohua's mouth subconsciously turned upwards to form a smile. His second brother initially wanted to explore the world outside when he decided to go Pingyang city, but was pulled by himself to learn martial arts. Surprisingly, his talent led the instructor to be full of praises of him, and he could look forward to a different life in the future.

Qiu Tong noticed Zhang Xiaohua's eyes closing and she asked in concern, "Xiaohua, are you tired? If so, you can rest for a while, because you will have to be spirited when we meet the young lady later on."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he said, "It is no problem, elder sister Qiu Tong. I was feeling sore in my arms, and cannot call up any strength from them. I am not tired at all since I usually work from morning until night on the fields when I am at home, this little bit won't tire me out at all."

Qiu Tong looked at Zhang Xiaohua lovingly and said, "You remind me of my

younger brother, but he is a scholar and do not have to suffer as much as you do. The heavens are unfair, it must be really hard on you to work so hard despite your young age.”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head innocently and said, “Elder sister, you don’t know this because you have not experience farm life before. In the village, if one does not work in the fields, his household will not have anything to eat. Not just me, but every male in the village upon reaching a certain age will have to start farming. Therefore, I am already used to this, and I do not feel that it is unfair at all.”

How would this Qiu Tong who only felt motherly love towards Zhang Xiaohua think of this all, she could only compare him to her little brother, and after learning of his difficult village life, she made the decision to protect him from hardship as long as he was under her wings.

Suddenly, Zhang Xiaohua seemed to have recalled something and he asked, “Oh right, elder sister. You said that I will be meeting the young lady later, who is she? Is there anything I have to pay attention to?”

Upon hearing his concern, Qiu Tong smiled and said, “The young lady is our Huanxi mountain villa master. She treats all of us well so you do not have to be wary of anything, just greet her politely later on. The young lady has always been kind-hearted so she would definitely accept you.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard the two words “accept”, his previously calm heart went into turmoil again. Even though he had matured over the past few days, he was only a child slightly above ten years of age, and had been rejected time and again on the same day. Thus, it was natural that he would lose confidence in himself and the world although this is a necessary part of growing up. In this cruel world, one must learn to find inner peace among the chaotic surroundings.

The carriage continued to travel on the same road it used in the morning, but when it reached a junction, it did not continue towards the highway which led to the Piaomiao sect, but rather went onto a small road. There were quite a few people living beside the road, and the sun was beginning to set at that time so the smoke was rising from the houses which made Zhang Xiaohua feel as though he was back in Guo village.

The carriage continued to travel for a while as it passed by several small alleys until a large field suddenly appeared. The field was surrounded by numerous lush trees and it faced a door which was even larger than Lotus escort's main door. There were two stone lions outside the main door which looked even more majestic than the ones at Lotus escort station, but the lacquered red door was not opened and there were no guards around. A black signboard was hung at the door with four characters on it like the escort station, but Zhang Xiaohua could only recognize the two words "mountain villa", and he guessed that it must be Huanxi mountain villa.

Indeed, Qiu tong said softly to Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, this is our Huanxi mountain villa."

Zhang Xiaohua felt his heart moved and he asked, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, since our Huanxi mountain villa is so close to Piaomiao sect's mountain villa, do we have any relations to the Piaomiao sect?"

Qiu Tong looked at Zhang Xiaohua as she replied, "I did not expect your thoughts to be so thorough, I will tell you about these matters when you begin living in the mountain villa for real, but you will have to withhold your curiosity for now."

Upon hearing her reply, Zhang Xiaohua did not question any further but he thought in his heart, "What other relationship can they have since they are so close to each other. Hehe, do you still think of me as a child?"

Actually, the Zhang Xiaohua at that time had not thought on why he would think so much and how he could infer so much from Qiu Tong's reply. If it was one year ago, could he have seen through the spider webs and horse footprints to make the conclusion he have then?"

The carriage continued to head towards the large door but it did not show any signs of stopping. Instead, it turned before the front door and travelled along the high walls before it reached a side door on the wall. Even though it was a side door, it was large enough to fit four carriages at a time, and there were guards in front of it. The guard was familiar with Qiu Tong, and after he checked the goods on the carriage and inquired about Zhang Xiaohua, he waved his hands to motion the carriage to pass through.

Zhang Xiaohua has never entered a mountain villa before and he thought that he would have to get off the carriage after passing through the entrance. However, the carriage has no intention of stopping as it continued to travel past several fields, some forests, and even a pond before stopping in front of a circular door.

Qiu Tong called Zhang Xiaohua to get off the carriage and the carriage went off after he got down.

When he walked into the small circular door, he saw a courtyard with another door inside. The courtyard had an extremely large board with green plants grown on it, the plant leaves were triangular and it moved with the wind. Under the board were a stone table and several stone chairs, and there was a pond in the corner of the courtyard. From afar, it seemed to have many red and green fishes swimming inside. On the right of the courtyard was a row of houses which were bigger than teacher Liu's house in Bali Gou, and on the left of the courtyard was empty space with some stone weights and weapons, like a common place to train martial arts. There was another circular door on the other side of the courtyard but it was unknown where it led to.

Qiu Tong brought Zhang Xiaohua into the courtyard, pointed to the stone chair under the board and said, "Xiaohua, you can rest on the chair for now. I will go and find the young lady and will bring you to meet her soon."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head in agreement and he put his knapsack on the stone table before seating himself on the chair. Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua seated, Qiu Tong flashed him a smile and walked towards the other circular door, turned a few bends and disappeared from view.

Zhang Xiaohua waited on the stone chair for quite some while, but Qiu Tong still did not return so he grew bored. He stood up and walked to the shelf to look at the unknown plant before looking at the fishes in the pond, and finally he went to the weapons area. He took out a blade and waved it about, then took a spear and thrust it once or twice, and the other weapons which names he did not know were also not spared from his poking about.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was getting excited from playing with the weapons on display, he suddenly heard a cough followed by a stern voice behind him, "Stop

playing around and put the weapons back.”

Zhang Xiaohua was shocked and he immediately returned the weapons to their original position before turning around, and he saw a tall and large old person with a ruddy face around fifty years of age with white streaks in his hair standing in the same position looking angry.

The old man took large strides over and asked severely, “Whose child are you from, how did you come here?”

When the other party approached closer, Zhang Xiaohua then realized that the old man’s left sleeve was tucked into his waist, and only the right hand was worn normally, it turned out that the old man was single-armed.

Zhang Xiaohua quickly replied, “I am Zhang Xiaohua, elder sister Qiu Tong brought me over to tend after the medicinal field.”

Upon hearing his reply, the old man grew angrier, paused in his footsteps and said, “What is this Qiu Tong thinking to bring this little child over, how can he have enough strength to do the required work in the field?”

After finishing his sentence, he did not bother about Zhang Xiaohua anymore and walked through the other door and like Qiu Tong, disappeared from view after several bends.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua was left alone again as he returned to the shelf feeling ridiculous. He did not dare to move around this time and sat down obediently to count the ants.

When Qiu Tong left Zhang Xiaohua in the courtyard and walked through the inner door herself, she walked through a bendy corridor and reached a rather large red walled courtyard. If Zhang Xiaohua was following behind her, he would have most definitely lost track of his way and got lost.

There was a large hall in the courtyard, and there were intricate patterns carved on its door and windows. Even though the sky has not turned pitch dark yet, the interior of the hall was already lit up, and there were several tables, chairs and decorations in the hall which made a grand sight. There was even an incense burner at a corner from which incense smoke wafting through the entire hall bringing a slight scent along with it.

When Qiu Tong noticed that the hall was empty, she went and searched the other rooms but still could not find anyone, so she went out again to look in other places.

Not long after, Qiu Tong accompanied a lady around twenty years of age as they entered through the doors of the hall. The lady was wearing a red attire in the design commonly found in Jianghu and had a precious sword on her waist. She had dark black hair which was tied casually around her shoulder, her skin was white and even looked cold, while a pair of phoenix brows framed her eyes, all of which gave off a handsome and ethereal aura that is not seeming of a young lady but fitting for the villa master of Huanxi mountain villa.

The lady asked as she walked, “What is it, you still can’t find a suitable person? You still do not need to resort to picking up a child from anywhere. How can you just let a person like that enter the mountain villa without checking his background?”

Even though her words were stern, her tone did not have any sign of abrasiveness which would make other people think that she was angry. Qiu Tong smiled as she said, “My good lady, don’t you have any confidence in the way I handle matters? Furthermore, hasn’t third master Qu who is clearly aware of the gravity of the situation recommended this solution?”

When the young lady entered the hall, Qiu Tong poured her a cup of water and continued to say, “His brother has also entered Lotus escort so a background check would be conducted over on that side. Hence we would be able to discover if there are any unusual points to their story. Lastly, the boy is quite interesting himself.”

Chapter 73: Meeting

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Meeting

The single-armed old man approached the two ladies and paid his greetings, and the young lady nodded while Qiu Tong returned the greeting respectfully. The young lady asked, "Elder Yu, what is the matter for your hastiness?"

The old man replied with a wooden face, "Young lady, Liu Er who worked in the herb field went home yesterday because his mother had passed away so we needed another man to make up the numbers. I told this to Qiu Tong during noontime, but when I returned, I found a young child slightly over ten years old standing in the courtyard outside claiming that he is the help Qiu Tong has brought from outside. Isn't this a sign of disrespect to me?"

Qiu Tong's face turned red upon hearing his string of accusation.

However, the young lady's tone was still pleasant as she comforted elder Yu, "Elder Yu, Qiu Tong has always completed her tasks with propriety. Why don't you sit down and listen to her explanation, and we can make other arrangements if you still feel unsatisfied after that?"

Elder Yu's expression turned more gentle as he apologized to Qiu Tong, "Qiu Tong, I am sorry for flaring my temper on you. Please go ahead and explain first."

Qiu Tong hurriedly replied, "I am not offended, elder Yu, I am also aware of the importance of the herb field. I was fortunate to have found Zhang Xiaohua, and was about to report to the young lady on my findings. Why don't you make your decision after hearing my story?"

Elder Yu nodded his head, pulled a chair over while Qiu Tong also poured him a cup of tea.

Then, Qiu Tong recounted the events that happened since morning without leaving off any details to the two people. The listeners nodded their heads when they heard Zhang Xiaohua returned the money pouch, agreeing that the boy had a good heart but when it came to the part where Zhang Xiaohua lifted the five hundred jin stone weight, the young lady's facial expression changed while elder Yu asked in disbelief, "Were you there in person to witness this? Was the stone really five hundred jin in weight?"

Qiu Tong replied, "I was not around when he lifted it because I was in a conversation with third master Qu. When I saw Zhang Xiaohua, he was already lifting the stone and although I cannot confirm that the stone was five hundred jin heavy, the spectators were saying that it was so I shouldn't be wrong."

Elder Yu shook his head and said, "If it is just based on what other people said, then the stone was probably not five hundred jin, and is more likely to be three or four hundred jin instead."

Qiu Tong did not have any experience in this area as she could only repeat what she heard from the people in the escort station. She has no impression of how heavy each hundred jin was so she answered, "That is also possible, since I did not see any evidence of the weight of the stone weight."

Elder Yu laughed as he said, "Qiu Tong, the weight of the stone weights are not written anywhere so you won't be able to tell even if you see it personally, haha."

Qiu Tong flushed as she replied, "Elder Yu knows that Qiu Tong does not know martial arts and is poking fun at me because of this."

The young lady felt relieved when saw that the two were not unhappy anymore and she said, "Elder Yu, even three to four hundred jin would be heavy for a ten year old child and it would be rare to find one that can carry that much. However, his age makes it a pity like what third master Qu has mentioned. If we had found him earlier, he would be recruited into Piaomiao sect and have the chance to contribute greatly to our advancement. Nevertheless, his talent will not be buried now that he has entered my Huanxi mountain villa. Elder Yu, I will leave this child in your care for now and you can watch as he does some manual chore, there is no need to appoint him to the herb fields yet before we receive

the result of the background check from Lotus escort. If he is alright, you will need to pay more attention to his training to see if he has potential in martial arts, and to give him all the help he needs. I would like to see for myself if our Huanxi mountain villa is able to nurture another Shi Niu.”

Upon hearing her instructions, elder Yu felt that she has not left any stones unturned so he did not say anything else. However, when he heard her last sentence, the overbearing image of Shi Niu appeared in his mind and when he compared it to the small frame of Zhang Xiaohua’s, he could not help but shook his head. He then respectfully took his leave.

After elder Yu has left, Qiu Tong slapped her forehead and said, “Young lady, I had cleanly forgotten about the arrangements for Zhang Xiaohua, I probably left it at the back of my head because of elder Yu, fortunately young lady is here to help speak on my behalf, otherwise he would probably not even put Zhang Xiaohua in his eyes.”

The young lady laughed as she pressed on Qiu Tong’s forehead. She said, “You little maid, I don’t see you do anything good since the beginning of the year, why did you suddenly want to help this Zhang Xiaohua? If not for his age, I would have assumed that you...?”

Qiu Tong immediately laughed as she said, “Young lady, look at what you are saying. Zhang Xiaohua reminds me of my little brother, and I only wanted to help because his circumstances are really pitiful. Furthermore, I am younger than young lady, if young lady has not found someone yet where would I find the courage to find one for myself? Haha.”

Qiu Tong could turn around to tease her mistress freely, so it could be seen that this young lady usually did not put on any airs and would treat her subordinates well.

The young lady did not give any retort. Instead, she sighed before looking at the darkening sky outside the hall. She said, “True, blood ties are thicker than any other kind of relationship. You are willing to help a stranger who reminded you of your little brother, which is an example of the so called ‘love the crows that comes with the house you love’, but I wonder if my elder brother’s work is going well this time.”

Qiu Tong noticed that the young lady was slightly distressed and she immediately said, "Young lady does not have to worry too much. Sect master Ou is highly skilled and there are not many people in Jianghu that can hurt him. Furthermore, they are not attacking any large-name sect, their target is only the Luoshui sect, and the Piaomiao sect has already planned this attack for a long time before so there is even less reason why we cannot achieve victory. Luoshui sect has no chances of defending from our attack so our young lady is worrying needlessly."

This young lady was actually the Piaomiao sect's sect master Ou Peng's younger sister, Ou Yan.

Even though Qiu Tong's words were reasonable, Ou Yan sighed again as she said, "Don't you know that one's feet will eventually get wet if one stands beside the river all the time? Blood and death is common in Jianghu, so there is no guarantee that one will not slip up. Even though we may look at Luoshui sect like a fat slab of meat, what stops other sects from looking at us the same way? I just hope that the heavens will allow my elder brother to come back safe and sound."

Qiu Tong straightened her face and said, "Sect master Ou has a good heart and will have good karma, not to mention that his little sister is so kind-hearted, I am sure that heavens will allow the sect master to come back safely."

Ou Yan smiled as she said, "Alright, little rascal, quickly make the arrangements for your little brother. Aren't you afraid that elder Yu will make things hard for him?"

Qiu Tong replied, "I am not going. Even if I was the person who brought him in, he will still have to be treated the same as the rest. Otherwise, it will be difficult for elder Yu to handle when Zhang Xiaohua becomes too wild."

Ou Yan said, "Qiu Tong-ah, I just about to praise your intellect so how can you be so muddleheaded? Zhang Xiaohua is still a child who just left his village, it will be unavoidable that he gets bullied when put in a group of young people."

Only then did Qiu Tong understand Ou Yan's meaning, and she replied, "I understand, I will go over to take a look soon. Not all the people who are working the medicinal field are kind hearted, I can't let this child get bullied by them."

After finishing her sentence, she took her leave respectful and turned around

to leave the hall. Suddenly, Ou Yan called out, “Qiu Tong, wait a moment.”

Qiu Tong responded, “Young lady, is there any other matter?”

Ou Yan said, “You do not have to go, it is better to let elder Yu arrange everything.”

Qiu Tong did not know if she could laugh or cry. She said, “My young mistress, what do you mean, do you want me to go or not?”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “I am not playing you for a fool, the reason why I asked you to go was because I was afraid that the child will be bullied. This time, I am asking you not to go because I want the child to endure some hardships to see his emotional intelligence. He is only a child after all, so it will be good for him suffer some inconvenience and learn the bad side of human nature so that he can grow to be a better person. Zhang Xiaohua was raised in the village so he may not understand the intrigues of human nature, so it is better to let him experience all that. Isn’t there the phrase ‘To achieve something big, one must first be molded by difficulties’, so letting him suffer now is not necessarily a bad thing.”

Qiu Tong nodded her head thoughtfully, and she felt happy for Zhang Xiaohua in her heart. Since her young lady had said so, then she probably had the intention to raise him well which would be a good opportunity for Zhang Xiaohua. Hence, she extinguished her thought of going out and stayed in the hall to accompany Ou Yan.

After Zhang Xiaohua was put down by elder Yu’s harsh words, his heart was in turmoil like fifteen buckets of water with seven filled and eight empty. He could neither sit nor stand as he was afraid that the single-armed old man would tell him to leave, that he was not welcomed in Huanxi mountain villa. If so, where could he go in the middle of the night?

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was imagining the worst, sounds of noise and footsteps echoed from the outer door again. Zhang Xiaohua immediately stood up and looked carefully at the circular door. Not long after, a azure robed man around twenty years of age who was as skinny as bamboo appeared while holding on to an oil lamp in one hand. When he saw Zhang Xiaohua waiting under the large shelf, he became surprised and went forward to ask, “Who are you?”

Even before Zhang Xiaohua could answer the man, a group of people entered the courtyard. Zhang Xiaohua estimated that there were about ten plus men, most holding an oil lamp while dressed in azure robes and little hats. Some of them were also holding fire torches, and they were dressed in well-fitted attires. Both groups of people did not mix with each other, they even entered the courtyard separately with the group of azure robed people in little hats entering first. Furthermore, the people in well-fitted attire had larger muscular bodies and appear to know martial arts whereas the azure robed people had normal figures.

Zhang Xiaohua could tell that the youth who spoke to him was the leader of the group that just entered, and he politely answered, “The humble me is Zhang Xiaohua and I came here to work on the medicinal fields. However, there seems... seems to be some problem and an old man with one arm went in to find somebody.”

“Zhang Xiaohua? Haha, the name Xiaohua is not bad.” Some of the azure robed people with hats could not help but snicker upon hearing Zhang Xiaohua’s self-introduction. They whispered among each other, “The name sounds like a girl’s name, but he looks pretty average. The sky is already dark so I can’t tell if his skin is fair. How does he live up to his name?”

Chapter 74: Roommate

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Roommate

Even though they were whispering among themselves, the group of people did not bother to keep their voices low so Zhang Xiaohua could overhear their conversation.

A person even said, “Who says this name is only for girls, my aunt’s household has a dog which is also called Xiaohua.”

“That’s right, my uncle’s granddaughter also has a cat which is named Xiaohua.”

When the person said that, the entire azure robed people with little hats broke out into laughter. The well-fitted people looked at the other group without smiling or commenting anything, their faces had mock smiles but it was uncertain if it was directed to Zhang Xiaohua or the azure robed people with little hats.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw their response, his face turned hot and his heart was crushed. He had used this name for over ten years so why had he not heard of anyone teasing him like this? When he played with the other children during his childhood, none of them would make fun of his name, but once he stepped out of the village, even his name was treated as a joke by these strangers. Zhang Xiaohua did not know if he should blame his mother for giving him such a name or the azure robed people for being so mean spirited.

The skinny leader seemed to be uncomfortable upon hearing the mockery so he turned around and said, “How can you all be so unruly? Quickly go back to your rooms and stop bullying the newcomer.”

The people covered their mouths but their faces were still full of sneers as they

returned to their respective rooms. Upon seeing that the azure robed people with little hats had left, a middle-aged man who was standing at the front of his well-fitted group walked over and patted Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders. He smiled but did not say anything as he led the other group of people back to their rooms.

Zhang Xiaohua found out that their rooms were the ones alongside the wall at the right side of the courtyard.

The skinny youth saw that everyone has left so he walked over to Zhang Xiaohua and smiled apologetically, "Nice to meet you, Zhang Xiaohua. My name is Tian Zhongxi, everyone calls me brother Xi, and I am the manager in this area. Those people from before were insensible but I hope you do not take any offence. They meant no ill-will; it is just that the mountain villa is so remote that it is hard to find something to laugh about. You will understand naturally after staying here long enough. Oh right, elder Yu, the one-armed old man, what did he appoint you as?"

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the smiling youth gratefully and said, "He has not said anything yet. Elder Yu has not come back after leaving just now so I do not know my own appointment."

Tian Zhongxi said, "Why don't you follow me for the time being, you can stay in my room until elder Yu comes back."

Zhang Xiaohua hesitated before he said, "But, I don't think that is nice. It is better if I stay here to wait for him."

Tian Zhongxi picked up Zhang Xiaohua's knapsack and said, "Let's go, it will be alright. The sky has already turned dark and the wind is so cold. Try not to fall sick even before you start working, wouldn't that be disastrous?"

After he finished his sentence, he walked in front while Zhang Xiaohua followed behind guilelessly, although he was feeling extremely grateful inside.

Tian Zhongxi's room was the first room from the inside, it was very tidy and there was a table, two chairs and two beds. One of the beds had a blanket on it while the other had a cabinet. There were also other things placed on the floor and they were arranged very neatly. Tian Zhongxi put Zhang Xiaohua's knapsack onto the table and poured some water from the teapot on the same table and gave it to Zhang Xiaohu, he said pleasantly, "Drink some water first and wait

here. You can help yourself to more water while I go wash up.”

Zhang Xiaohua expressed his thanks and took the teacup, he had not drunk a sip of water since lunch and was feeling thirsty as if smoke had gone into his throat. He did not pretend to be courteous as he took the cup and gulped its contents immediately before the other party poured another cup and he gulped it down again. Only after then did he put the teacup down.

Tian Zhongxi handed over another cup to Zhang Xiaohua before he took out a copper basin and went out to draw some water to wash up.

While Zhang Xiaohua was waiting for Tian Zhongxi to return, he heard a voice from outside calling, “Zhang Xiaohua, Zhang Xiaohua, where are you?”

Zhang Xiaohua thought that things had turned bad and he immediately ran out of the room. Indeed, the single-armed old man was shouting loudly while standing around the stone table under the shelf.

Zhang Xiaohua ran to elder Yu’s front and said, “Hello elder Yu, I was sitting in elder brother Xi’s room for a while.”

Elder Yu had the same wooden expression on his face as he said, “Mm, since you know that I am elder Yu, you should also know that I am the one in charge of the medicinal field. I do not care who brought you in but you will have to listen to my orders when you are here. Your duty has not been decided yet so you can familiarize yourself with the area during this time.”

Right at that moment, Tian Zhongxi walked over with the copper basin and elder Yu called out, “Zhongxi, come over. Since you two have already met, this is Zhang Xiaohua who we found in Lotus escort. He does not have any duties for the moment, so you can arrange for him to familiarize himself for the time being.”

When Tian Zhongxi heard the four words “Lotus escort”, his facial muscles twitched but it was quickly replaced with a smile as he said, “Alright, elder Yu. You can rest easy, I will give Zhang Xiaohua a good orientation of the grounds. That Liu Er left in such a hurry and he had not even kept his bedsheets so I think we can let Zhang Xiaohua rest on Liu Er’s bed for now.”

Elder Yu nodded his head and said, “You can do what you think is best.”

After saying that, elder Yu turned around, walked through the inner door and disappeared soon after.

Tian Zhongxi took Zhang Xiaohua to collect his knapsack and led him to a room. When Zhang Xiaohua entered the room, he was instantly assaulted by the stench of athlete's foot. As he raised his head to look at the surroundings, he saw an azure robed skinny middle aged man sitting on his bed and squinting his eyes while humming to a tune. His two hands were massaging his own smelly foot, and once in a while would bring his finger to his nose for a sniff as though his hands were dabbed with perfume.

The scene made Zhang Xiaohua frowned, and Tian Zhongxi even shouted, "Ma Jing." Then, he took several strides across the room and opened the windows, and when Ma Jing heard Tian Zhongxi's voice, he immediately jumped off the bed and put his shoes back on. Then, he wiped his hands off his shirt and said, "Brother Xi, why did you come to my room? Is anything the matter?"

Tian Zhongxi did not walk over but stayed beside the window, he wrinkled his brow and said, "Ma Jing, I don't wish to nag but why do you still behave like this at thirty plus years old, it is no wonder why you can't find a bride."

Ma Jing was unhappy and he rebuked, "Brother Xi, can you stop harping about that. I am unmarried because no one has uncovered this treasure mine yet. My beauty is on the inside unlike those gigolos, so the other party has to observe and establish a deep connection first before she can discover it."

Tian Zhongxi laughed involuntarily, and when Zhang Xiaohua looked at this person who was taller than him by half a head and had eyebrows like a robber and eyes like a rat, "Puahh" a laugh escaped him. Ma Jing immediately asked, "Zhang Xiaohua, do you have another opinion?"

Zhang Xiaohua immediately raised a thumb up towards the other man and praised, "Elder brother Ma is such a character. I have only just met you but am already awed by you dignified handsome appearance. What other opinion can I have apart from wanting to learn from you in the future?"

After saying his words, he felt goosebumps crawling all over his skin as he thought inside, "This kind of bootlicking is something an ordinary person is not capable of. Since I have only just arrived, it would be better to be careful. This

place isn't Guo village so I would have to change myself to adapt to the surroundings. Although being honest is nice, what Liu Kai said about survival of the fittest still holds through, and who can be honest when one's life is on the line?"

Without realizing it, our Zhang Xiaohua's mentality had taken another step towards maturity, and a bumpkin freshly out from the village had just gained more experience about the outside world.

When Ma Jing heard Zhang Xiaohua's words, he was elated and said, "Brother-ah, if you did not say that, brother would not take care of you in the future. Come, sit over here."

He then reached out his hands to pull Zhang Xiaohua over, and when Zhang Xiaohua looked at the pair of hands, his heart clenched and he immediately said, "Oh, let's wait for elder brother Xi to finish his piece first."

Ma Jing stopped himself when he heard his response and he nodded while saying, "Mm, you are right. Brother Xi, are you letting Zhang Xiaohua take Liu Er's bed?"

Tian Zhongxi nodded and said, "Yes, it is already late and we do not have time to prepare something else, so Zhang Xiaohua will stay here for the time being as we observe Liu Er's situation. We can talk about the future later on."

Ma Jing replied, "No problem, since he has entered the Huanxi mountain villa, then he is now one of our brothers, so whatever you say is fine by me. Come, brother, let me help take your knapsack."

As he talked, he reached his two hands over to Zhang Xiaohua's knapsack, but Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly took two steps and walked to the empty bed on the other side and threw his belonging on the bed, before saying, "Brother Ma should rest more, I can take care of this little thing myself."

Ma Jing stood at his spot and laughed without saying anything else.

Tian Zhongxi glanced over at the two people and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, you will stay here during this time. If you encounter any problems that you cannot solve on your own, just come over to find me. You cannot wear what you are wearing now in this place, but there is indeed a problem with suitable clothes for you, I will have to ask elder Yu about this later."

Ma Jing said from his side, "Brother Xi, Zhang Xiaohua is only slightly small, I think that there are attendants in the villa who are about the same size as him. There are many clothes for his size at the supervisor's area, you can just pick some up over there. Why bother elder Yu?"

Tian Zhongxi did not reply, he simply smiled and walked towards the entrance of the room. However, he left a line, "Zhang Xiaohua was recruited from Lotus escort's side so we don't really need to get him a set of our mountain villa uniform."

Ma Jing was surprised as he asked, "Lotus escort?"

He turned his head around to look at Zhang Xiaohua before bursting in laughter, "You, Lotus escort? Haha."

He laughed as he walked back to his bed and sat cross legged on it. His two hands naturally supported his legs as he said, "A child from Lotus escort? That's too hard to believe. However, this will be quite fun."

Then, he curled his mouth.

He said to Zhang Xiaohua, "That, little brother Xiaohua, you can be at ease around here. We will be roommates from today onwards, so you don't have to be too courteous and just ask big brother anything. Big brother here is least afraid of trouble."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "Alright, elder brother Ma, I will definitely inform you if there is anything troubling me."

Even this roommate of his had many peculiarities, Zhang Xiaohua felt satisfied when he looked at around the light and spacious room. It was much larger than the two rooms at home, so sleeping here would be especially comfortable. However, he wondered if his second brother was being put at a good place as well? Also, there were his parents at home, sigh, he has already begun to miss them after leaving for only a few days.

Nevertheless, Zhang Xiaohua warned himself, he should not succumb to his homesickness or slack off. All the efforts he put in here will be for the sake of a better, safer future for his family.

As these thoughts crossed his mind, his homesickness slowly began to fade

away.

Chapter 75: Different

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Different

Zhang Xiaohua tidied up the bedsheets on the bed, opened his knapsack and took out his belonging before placing his knapsack into the cabinet above his bed.

Even though the bed had belonged to someone else not long ago, everything was already arranged neatly. Liu Er did not leave behind much before he left so it saved Zhang Xiaohua the time and effort of cleaning the space up.

After he finished his packing, Zhang Xiaohua sat on his bed and just as he was inspecting the room carefully, his tummy growled like the sound of thunder. Zhang Xiaohua's face turned red and he peeped at Ma Jing. Indeed, the latter was looking over and when their eyes met, Ma Jing laughed as he said, "Little brother Xiaohua, are you hungry? Don't worry, we will have our meal in short while."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, "Okay."

Ever since the lunch in front of Piaomiao sect during noon, Zhang Xiaohua has not eaten anything else, and even lifted stone weight in Lotus escort. Although he did not feel anything previously, the little water he drunk in Tian Zhongxi's room made him realize how hungry he was.

Fortunately, Ma Jing hopped off his bed and he picked up his copper basin not too long later before motioning to Zhang Xiaohua and saying, "Come on, little brother, let's go have our meal."

Zhang Xiaohua became relieved and he followed behind Ma Jing to walk out of the room.

The canteen was after the inner door, Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly dizzy following Ma Jing walked through several twists and bends through the corridor. Each courtyard was like the first one with people living inside, but some had lamps that had already extinguished and were not lit up. Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to ask too many questions so he followed quietly behind, and just as he lost track of where he was, Ma Jing's footsteps finally stopped at a large hall that was brightly lit.

The canteen was very big and larger than Zhang Xiaohua had expected, but he could not estimate its exact size, what he could tell was there were six rows of tables, each made up of around ten plus tables filled up the canteen. However, there were no people eating in the canteen at that moment, and the whole hall was empty without a soul.

When Ma Jing stepped into the hall, he continued to walk towards a corner. Zhang Xiaohua studied his surroundings before hurriedly catching up to behind Ma Jing. What a joke, there were so many tables so where should one sit? However, when Zhang Xiaohua reached the corner, he realized his mistake; all the other tables but the table in that corner was empty, only that particular row had utensils and food placed on it, so where else could he sit but there?

Ma Jing had already found a place to sit, but Zhang Xiaohua realized a problem when he got closer. There were three tables where food was placed on, and two of the three tables were fully occupied by the other azure robed men with little hats. There was no excess space so Zhang Xiaohua became troubled as he wondered where his predecessor Liu Er would usually sit?

Ma Jing picked up his bowl and was about to start eating when he saw Zhang Xiaohua standing still on his spot. Surprised, he smiled and said while turning back to his food, "There is no more seats, Xiaohua, so you can sit at that unoccupied table."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and just as he was about to go over, an angry voice called out from nowhere, "Wanting to pick your food when you just arrive? Why don't you look at yourself before you think of eating?"

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and turned back to look, but he could not spot the speaker. When, Zhang Xiaohua studied the empty table and compared it

again to the food Ma Jing and the rest were eating, he indeed spotted some differences. Even though Zhang Xiaohua could not recognize the food, he could see from the bowls and dishes that the servings on Ma Jing's table as obviously larger and the variety fewer. It was not the only difference but Zhang Xiaohua was not clear about what the other differences were.

At that moment, even if Zhang Xiaohua was more stupid, he would have realized that the other table was not somewhere he should sit. Furthermore, Zhang Xiao was not stupid, he was only ignorant of the world because of his limited experience. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua paused his tracks and he grew a sliver of suspicion in his heart, what is Ma Jing's meaning of doing this?

Just as he was preoccupied with his thoughts, more people entered the canteen and when Zhang Xiaohua turned around, he saw the four well-fitted men who walked to the empty table and began eating at their own pace. None of them bothered to look at the azure robed men with little hats, and only the man who previously patted Zhang Xiaohua's shoulder spared the latter a glance before continuing his meal.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was feeling anxious of what to do, a voice called out from behind, "Zhang Xiaohua? Why aren't you sitting down to eat?"

Zhang Xiaohua turned his head and saw Tian Zhongxi walking over.

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "The tables are all full, there is no place for me to sit."

Tian Zhongxi was surprised and he glanced at the two tables of azure robed men who continued to eat with their heads bent and not daring to meet his eyes. His brows wrinkled as he smiled towards Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Haha, there is, come follow me."

After finishing his sentence, he walked over to Ma Jing's side, pulled a stool from under the table, and then said to Zhang Xiaohua, "You can sit here." Then, he patted the shoulder of Ma Jing and the other person who was sitting beside and said, "The two of you make some space."

Ma Jing smiled and replied, "Brother Xi, there is no space left, where can I move?"

Tian Zhong Xi stared into the other party's eyes and said, "Liu Er could sit here

usually, and Zhang Xiaohua is even smaller than Liu Er, so why is there not enough space?”

The other person did not say anything and he pulled his seat slightly further from the table. Ma Jing saw his partner’s reaction and followed without a choice. Even though there was not much space, it was definitely enough for Zhang Xiaohua to sit then. Tian Zhongxi then walked to the other table where the people who were eating there immediately pulled their seats back to make space for him.

When Zhang Xiaohua sat on his stool, he began to wolf down the sumptuous dinner in large bites. Not to mention how hungry he was, the food displayed on the table were enticing enough themselves to make Zhang Xiaohua gobble down with large bites. When had our pitiful Xiaohua ever seen such a sumptuous setting on the table in the village; the dish of meat that was cooked using an unknown method tasted even better than five spiced meat, and the fish had such a huge head although its body was missing. The main dish was also especially delicious, ah, it would be great if his grandmother could try some of it, but the more Zhang Xiaohua thought, the slower he ate. At that moment, he noticed that the people had sitting beside had put down their chopsticks and their gaze was on him and his bowl. Some had expressions smirks of mockery, others had good-natured smiles of pity, and someone even said softly, “I knew right away that he came from the village and has never seen this food before.”

Fortunately Zhang Xiaohua was already used to such gazes by this time, and he was in a ‘gentle breeze climbs up the mountain’ mood as he continued to eat without bothering about the attention. When they saw that Zhang Xiaohua was unbothered by them, the azure robed men with little hats no longer paid attention to the latter and continued to eat while chatting with each other. Zhang Xiaohua even overheard some of the people glanced over to the other table and clenched their teeth while saying, “We all do the same work here, yet why do they get to eat better food while we can’t?”

This was of no concern to Zhang Xiaohua who was already enjoying the food he got to eat, why would he bother about the better meal beside? Furthermore, the food there may have more varieties but they were smaller in portion than the ones on his table.

Delicious food and eat more, these were the only two thoughts in Zhang Xiaohua's head that night.

Even when Zhang Xiaohua had eaten his fill, there were still much leftovers on the table. Zhang Xiaohua could not help but think how nice it would be if he could give these leftovers to the pig in his household.

The thought stayed in his head as he followed the group of people back to his room.

When he returned to his own room, Ma Jing and Zhang Xiaohua both drank some water and went back to their beds. The Ma Jing continued to pick on his smelly foot while Zhang Xiaohua watched on, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but wonder if this Ma Jing was planning to spread his athlete foot to someone else? He should take the opportunity now to tie his relationship closer to the other party.

The smell in the room became more and more unpleasant, and Zhang Xiaohua wondered if this Liu Er had purposely used his mother's "funeral" as an excuse to leave, and he could not wait for Liu Er to come back so that he could move to another room, without realizing that he might have to leave when Liu Er returned.

Finally, Zhang Xiaohua could not tolerate the smell and he got off his bed to open the windows, and once the windows were opened, he peered into the scenery of the night and took long gasps of the fresh air before asking Ma Jing, "Elder brother Ma Jing, why are there two types of food during dinner? Can you explain it to me?"

Ma Jing put down his finger that was at his nose, he squinted his small eyes and said, "Xiaohua is very sensible and motivated to improve himself. Knowing to ask when in doubt would mean that you can develop further. In that case, I shall not hide anything and explain it to you clearly."

After finishing his sentence, he turned his gaze towards the opened windows and into the vast night sky as though he was reminiscing of something that has long passed. Ma Jing said in deep mysterious voice, "In a long, long time ago..."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he asked, "How long is long, long ago?"

Ma Jing cleared his voice and answered, "Before the last New Year."

"Dang" The sound interrupted Ma Jing's storytelling. Ma Jing looked at Zhang Xiaohua who has fallen on the floor and thought, "His falling posture is handsome even though he is still a child, indeed birds of the same feather flock together, only he has the right to be my roommate." Then he asked in concern, "What is wrong?"

"Oh, nothing, my thoughts stumbled through time and space while listening to your story." Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he said.

EN: Haha MC, so cute.

Ma Jing continued, "So before the New Year, the people who took care of the medicinal fields in Huanxi mountain villa, that is us, would eat from the same table. Even though life was hard, we were all happily living a peaceful and harmonious life. However, after the New Year around the eighteenth of the first month of the year, the mountain villa opened another few medicinal fields, do you know what herbs were being cultivated there?"

Zhang Xiaohua was anxious as he replied, "I do not know."

Ma Jing pressed on, "Try to guess?"

Zhang Xiaohua was in a loss and he said, "I really do not know, I have not grown herbs before, nor even seen them. How can I guess?"

"En." Ma Jing nodded his head as he said, "I knew that you would be unable to guess."

"So what herb was it?" Zhang Xiaohua asked sincerely.

Ma Jing said his reply very slowly, "That is, I do not know either."

"Dang", Zhang Xiaohua fell off the bed and Ma Jing gasped in praise, "What a handsome posture."

Chapter 76: Grumble

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Grumble

Ma Jing continued, "We are in charge of opening the fields. Xiaohua, did you know that opening the fields is a very tiring job, and we were so exhausted that our skins had shed. Oh right, have you opened a field before? Mm, you are still so young so I doubt that you have. You won't understand the pains of opening a field, that cold winter wind, the fluttering snowflakes, our hands were so cold that they cracked. Look here, my fingers are still not recovered yet and they will hurt every time it rains."

Zhang Xiaohua looked at Ma Jing who was obviously stalling his story and thought of kicking his mouth until it rotted so that he would continue, and at the same time, he was afraid that the other party would bring his fingers closer to his face to give him a closer look. He thought secretly, "This Ma Jing is ridiculously unbelievable, whose finger bones will break from the cold?"

Seeing that Ma Jing was still trying to show him his hands, Zhang Xiaohua said quickly, "Elder brother Ma, I have opened a field before as well, and it is indeed tiring. Why don't you continue talking about the medicinal field?"

"Cough, cough, you have opened a field before? In that case, you should know the difficulties of reclaiming a field." Ma Jing smiled as he continued, "After opening the field, they chased us out and did not let us near the field anymore. Hallmaster Bai and elder Hu from the pharmacy hall took over the fields and grew some type of herb on it, and we all thought that we could take care of these herbs. Xiaohua, that herb must be something precious, and if it is well taken care of, the supervisor would definitely reward us with a larger bonus, and he would increase our monthly pay. If our monthly pay was increased, I would definitely be able to bring little Red Peach back home as my bride." Ma Jing 's

eyes which were gazing far away into the night sky appeared to come back to the room.

Zhang Xiaohua asked urgently, “Who is little Red Peach?”

“Little Red Peach is drunken fragrance house’s... cough cough” Ma Jing stopped his explanation and said, “Wo, I have said too much. Even if there is no monthly pay increment, it will be good enough if they allow to look at the precious herb so our lives would at least be not as mundane. However, ...”

Ma Jing then said in a revengeful tone, “They.....they actually fenced off these new fields from the rest of the fields and even prohibited us from going over. Then, they picked four dogs from Piaomiao sect’s pharmacy hall to take care of the herbs, and these dogs actually get treated....treated better than us, not only do they get three silvers a month, the food they eat is better than ours, the carriage they use is first class, and even the hotel they stay in has four stars more than us.”

“Don’t you agree that this is unfair to the extreme? Not just me but all of us brothers are unhappy about the arrangements, and we wanted to vent off our anger on them but... but... ...” Ma Jing who was clenching his teeth in anger turned his sentences into a stutter.

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “But what?”

“Sigh.....” Ma Jing heaved another sigh and he lowered his head in dejection, stopped his hand gestures and said, “But we don’t know martial arts, so how can we beat them?”

“Ah! You all do not know martial arts?” Zhang Xiaohua exclaimed in surprise.

“Why? Is it strange to not know martial arts? Who says that a servant has to know martial arts?” Ma Jing was unhappy when he saw Zhang Xiaohua’s surprise.

“But... ...” Zhang Xiaohua could not say anything else as he thought inside, “If you do not know martial arts, then who is going to teach them to me.”

“But what? Could it be that you know martial arts? Oh right, you were recruited from the Lotus escort so you definitely know martial arts. Little brother, let’s find a day to teach your big brother martial arts okay?” Ma Jing

seemed to have awakened from his stupor and he tried to get off his bed to go towards Zhang Xiaohua.

Zhang Xiaohua quickly waved his hands and answered, “Elder brother Ma, do I look like I know any martial arts?”

Ma Jing studied Zhang Xiaohua for a few glances and said suspiciously, “I can’t really tell, but I have heard that Piaomiao disciples all started learning martial arts when they were four to five years old. Since you are so old, your martial arts must be awesome.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, “If I have learnt martial arts since I was four or five, would I still need to grow herbs in the mountain villa?”

Ma Jing cocked his head and pondered, and then said, “True, you would have been in Piaomiao mountain villa, not Huanxi mountain villa.” He then crossed his legs and adopted a comfortable position again.

However, Ma Jing still seemed curious as he asked, “How did you get to Lotus escort, and how did you come here from there? Isn’t Lotus escort much better than over here?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and explained, “It is not that I do not want to stay in Lotus escort, but when I tried to apply for the position of a delivery hand there, I was rejected and while I speaking to fourth uncle Wen, elder sister Qiu Tong from the mountain villa was looking for another helper and she picked me by coincidence. Since I had nowhere else to go, I decided to just come here.”

Ma Jing squinted his eyes and said, “En, a delivery hand has to risk his life, who would dare to hire you given your size. What? Qiu Tong, why did she pick you? You know her?”

Ma Jing’s beady eyes widened as large as they could and light seemed to shoot from them. Zhang Xiaohua quickly explained, “How would I know elder sister Qiu Tong, it is just because she pitied me for having nowhere to go so she offered to keep me here.”

Ma Jing nodded his head and said, “True, Qiu Tong is a kind-hearted lady. Not only does she have a good personality, her figure is pretty good as well, that butt, that chest... ..”

A lecherous gleam appeared in Ma Jing's small eyes and it seemed to pass through space to reach Qiu Tong who was busy attending to Ou Yan.

After talking for almost the whole time, Ma Jing suddenly turned towards Zhang Xiaohua and smiled. He said, "Even though Qiu Tong brought you here, you cannot have any designs on her. She is all of our brother's dream woman, and I do not know how many of us secretly have a crush on her, you know? The room beside us....."

Zhang Xiaohua was speechless, this Ma Jing was not a normal busybody, the ten plus people's daily affairs were all learnt by him. At the same time, Zhang Xiaohua made a mental note that he had to avoid this busybody at all cost in the future.

Having eaten his fill and satisfied his thirst, Zhang Xiaohua listened to Ma Jing's endless chatter while wondering when the latter would ever fall asleep. The room had an unpleasant odor, but while Zhang Xiaohua listened to the stories, his eyes began to close and he fell asleep without realizing it.

When Ma Jing felt thirsty and was about to get up to drink some water, he realized that Zhang Xiaohua had fallen asleep and he had been playing the flute to a bull. Thus, he quietly drank some water, slipped on his shoes and went to find someone else.

It was nighttime but the room was not quiet at all. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua has fallen asleep long ago because when Ma Jing finally slept, his earth-shattering snores were even able to pass through cotton in the ear. It was like water rushing from a fall, and he would occasionally speak in his dream. When he was not doing either, he would grind his teeth and cause an irritating "jiji" sound. Our poor Xiaohua, luckily he is a heavy sleeper who would not wake up no matter what in the night, otherwise he would have been frightened out of his wits.

Mm, even if he had woken up, he would faint immediately from the horrible smell in the room and would not have a chance to listen to any of the noises, no wonder Ma Jing did not wash his feet.

However, our Zhang Xiaohua could not smell Ma Jing's athlete foot at that moment. His breaths were long and light as though it was non-existent, and if

someone were to put his finger onto his nose, they would realize that they could not feel his breathing. Maybe it was not air that he was breathing in? Or perhaps, the him at that moment is not using his nose but the pores on his entire body to breathe? Nobody knows.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua woke up punctually and before he recalled where he was, the nose-piercing stench hit his nose. Zhang Xiaohua was like a rabbit which had left its burrow, he shot like an arrow towards the door and after exiting, took several deep breaths of the fresh morning air. Only then did he remember that he was in Huanxi mountain villa, and of the current situation he was in.

When he turned his head and looked at his house which was no different from the others, he deliberated if he should go back. Seeing that the courtyard was empty, he guessed that everyone else was still sleeping so he walked confidently to the circular outer door.

When he arrived the day before, the sky was already dark so he did not get a good view, and although he had a general understanding of the layout of Huanxi mountain villa, he was still shocked by the view when he exited from the door.

The scene in front of him was the foot of the mountain, and he could see numerous fields on one glance. There was even a forest, and beside it were uncountable houses that stretched endlessly to as far as he could see, so this was Huanxi mountain villa? How come it feels much larger than Guo village?

The mountain seemed to be part of Huanxi mountain villa, and there were many trees and flat farm fields that looked like steps on it. Zhang Xiaohua was confused, how could there be fields on the mountain?

Zhang Xiaohua was too lazy to think further after his initial surprise, there would eventually be an opportunity to go over for a look since he had already decided to live here. His mind has been broadened by the many new things he saw during these few days, and he thought then that this trip would not be a waste even if he did not manage to learn any martial arts.

When he thought about learning martial arts, Zhang Xiaohua's heart moved and he faced the sun and performed a swallowing motion before feeling the mouthful of warmth which went down into his tummy, creating a comfortable

sensation throughout his body. This action has already become a daily homework in the morning.

After that, his memory went back to the demonstration of the sixth fist which he saw in Lotus escort, and he began to try out each move one after the other. However, after performing the first few moves, he forgotten the rest that followed, and even though he squeezed his brain juice to remember as hard as he could, the subsequent moves would not return into his memory, could it be that he was really not suitable for martial arts?

However, his second brother has managed to learn so fast, and since they shared the same blood, surely there cannot be such a large difference between them?

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was thinking in pain, he turned his head and saw a pair of eyes looking at him, it was actually the middle-aged man in well-fitted attire from yesterday.

Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly went over to send his greetings, and the other party also smiled and returned his greetings before walking over to a side, adopting a posture and began to practice his fist. Zhang Xiaohua did not know what the man was practicing but he could feel that it was like a dragon's movement and tiger's step, and each fist would carry gusts of violent wind with it. Zhang Xiaohua was starstruck and felt incomparably jealous.

Not long after, the other three well-fitted attired people came out and stood at different places to practice their martial arts while Zhang Xiaohua watched them from afar. He continued to watch them until they finished their practice, and followed behind them as they returned back to the courtyard. As he look at the back of their figures, he could not help but think, "If I can master that set of hand movements, I should be able to protect my family, only I do not know if they will be willing to teach it to me?"

Chapter 77: Played a fool

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Played a fool

The current Zhang Xiaohua learnt that five spiced meat was not the most delicious thing in the world, and he no longer dreamt of being able to eat five spiced meat. Rather, martial arts had become his new five spiced meat.

However, to be able to eat this 'five spiced meat' would require much effort on his part. Zhang Xiaohua could not help but wonder as he looked at the backs of the four men.

The courtyard was still quiet, and the group of azure robed men with little hats were probably still in dreamland like lazy pigs, how do they want to compete with Piaomiao sect's disciples if they acted like this? Do they have the ability to do so? Even though he just arrived yesterday, Zhang Xiaohua had already begun to feel bored. Perhaps they expected him to not be able to stick through and decided to make fun of him while he was still here.

However, as he looked back to the house where he spent the night, Zhang Xiaohua felt his forehead hurt, why did this Liu Er have such a roommate? What could he not find someone else with better standards?

Zhang Xiaohua pinched his nose as he opened the windows. Even though summer had just arrived, the wind was still cold and the unpleasant still air was blown off by it.

Only then did Zhang Xiaohua dare to enter the room.

After finding a copper basin and washing his face, Zhang Xiaohua sat back on his bed and drank some water.

The Ma Jing who was opposite him flipped his body, stretched his lazy bones

and sat up. He said, “Whoever falls asleep first, I would know his normal lifestyle.”

“Dang”, Zhang Xiaohua did not fall off the bed this time, it was the cup which dropped onto the bed. Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly kept his sheets to prevent them from getting wet while he smiled bitter and asked, “Elder brother Ma, why are you so poetic in the morning?”

Ma Jing shrugged and said, “I got inspired from my dream, so what about it? Your elder brother Ma cannot be poetic?”

Zhang Xiaohua complimented continuously, “It was a very good poem.”

Breakfast was held in the same canteen and the food was different for the two different groups again. Zhang Xiaohua was not confused this time as he already learnt the reason for so, and he minded his own business and ate his breakfast heartily. However, the rest of his group were unable to ignore what they felt was unjustified, they would share sarcastic remarks every now and then among each other. The other four people acted like they did not even hear them and they ate their breakfast heartily like Zhang Xiaohua. They treated the hostile glances like another accompanying dish as they hurriedly finished their meal and walked off, leaving behind a group of angry expressions on the remaining people.

After everyone had their fill, Zhang Xiaohua patted his full tummy and got up to leave the canteen. He noticed the remaining food on the table, recalled the way the other people had eaten and wondered if the workload on the fields was not too heavy? Why did they eat so little? Will they have the strength to work later on?

When Zhang Xiaohua returned to his room, he saw that Ma Jing has finished preparing himself and was about to walk out. The former quickly followed behind him, but just as he exited the room again, he heard Tian Zhongxi called to stop him.

Tian Zhongxi smiled as he said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Xiaohua, you do not need to hurry and start work after just arriving. Wait here while I let them arrange the work for the rest, and I will pick you up after then to arrange yours.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he answered, “Okay, I will wait over here for you.”

Tian Zhongxi saw that Zhang Xiaohua stood at door and he brought Ma Jing and the four well-fitted dressed men away first.

Zhang Xiaohua did not feel that the situation was strange, but Ma Jing secretly asked Tian Zhongxi, “Brother Xi, wouldn’t it be enough for me to take Zhang Xiaohua around, why must you bring him around personally?”

Tian Zhongxi replied, “Even though Zhang Xiaohua said that he was from Lotus escort, we are still unsure of his background. Even if there do not seem to be anything suspicious of, it will be safer if we checked his background thoroughly first. This is what the supervisor told me last night, so we will just need to follow his instructions.”

Ma Jing was stunned, and he said in despair, “Why you not said this earlier, I have already told him many of this mountain villa’s secrets.”

Tian Zhongxi was surprised for a while but he laughed and said, “What secret could you know? Whatever it is, it will not be a secret anymore if you know it. Even I do not know the important secrets of our mountain villa, where would you learn them from? Don’t overthink the situation, there should not be anything wrong with Zhang Xiaohua else Qiu Tong would not have brought him back.”

Ma Jing felt relieved after hearing that.

Zhang Xiaohua was waiting outside the door and he saw Tian Zhongxi brought the rest away when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned his head and realized that elder Yu has arrived, so he quickly paid his greetings. Elder Yu walked over, patted his shoulder and said smilingly, “Zhang Xiaohua, I heard that you wanted to learn martial arts?”

Zhang Xiaohua eyes brightened and he replied, “Yes, elder Yu.”

Elder Yu asked again, “Qiu Tong said yesterday that your strength is unordinary, and you could lift a five hundred jin weight?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and said, “Elder Yu, my strength is pretty strong and I did lift two stone weights yesterday, but I am unsure of how heavy they were.”

Elder Yu said, “Wanting to learn martial arts is a good thing but you have already passed the best time to start learning. Still, it will be fine if we teach you

some self-defense. As long as you work hard, I will find someone to teach you martial arts, okay?”

Zhang Xiaohua could not believe his own ears and he said excitedly, “Really, elder Yu, you won’t lie to me?”

Elder Yu smiled as he said, “Why would I lie to you, you will naturally find out in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Haha, that would be great. I will definitely practice harder than second brother.”

Elder Yu asked, “You second brother has entered Lotus escort yesterday right?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Yes, third uncle Wen from the Lotus escort even said that he had good potential and would be able to achieve something if he practiced hard.”

Elder Yu smiled as he encouraged Zhang Xiaohua, “Mm, if your second brother has potential, than you would naturally be not too far off as well. Train hard for the sake of your family.”

Zhang Xiaohua bowed again and said, “Thank you elder Yu for your encouragement, I will definitely do so.”

Elder Yu then left, but he thought as he walked away, “This Zhang Xiaohua seemed to be pretty normal, and his strength is also pretty average. I wonder why the young lady would pay so much attention to him and let him learn martial arts?”

Actually, elder Yu had misunderstood Ou Yan’s intentions, the latter had not looked upon Zhang Xiaohua favorably based on what she knew of him. Rather, she was reminded of her elder brother by Qiu Tong’s “love the crows that came on the roof of the house one loves” and had raised the suggestion casually. Furthermore, it was as simple as a sentence for someone of her position to allow a lowly servant to learn martial arts, especially since the person in question as a child who had passed the best age for learning martial arts.

Zhang Xiaohua stood outside the door for a meal worth of time before Tian Zhongxi came back and brought Zhang Xiaohua around for an orientation. Just

as Ma Jing had said before, there were many rare unknown plants cultivated in Huanxi mountain villa. The crops included grains, flowers, herbs, and many others, and each had servants taking care of them. Tian Zhongxi and the other people were in charge of the herb fields, and he explained the various herbs to Zhang Xiaohua as he pointed to the fields from afar. Zhang Xiaohua has naturally not heard of any of the herbs before so he carefully carved them into his head, and was relieved that his duties were familiar to him as he only had to plant, weed and water them. Then Zhang Xiaohua thought back to the experience he had accumulated at home, he did not worry about any of those tasks.

For the following few days, Tian Zhongxi would orientate Zhang Xiaohua and not allow the latter to work, even when he was busy with his own work. Zhang Xiaohua felt that it was strange, but he continued his pattern of life where he would watch the four men practice martial arts in the morning, walked around the villa in the day, nap under the tree when he was free and listened to Ma Jing's chatter in the night. This kind of life was very.... boring.

Zhang Xiaohua had come to learn martial arts but he was thrown here to familiarize himself with the area. Even though he got to eat things he never tasted before, and see and heard things outside his knowledge, he would always feel uncomfortable, not to mention the stench of feet in his room every night.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua wanted to say something when he first arrived but was too awkward to do so. However, he could not bear the stench any longer so he asked Ma Jing politely to wash his feet before sleeping. Ma Jing did not heed him at all and continued to do as he pleased, so how do you think Zhang Xiaohua would feel? Finally, Zhang Xiaohua was forced to open the window every night to let in some fresh air, but the window would be closed by the time he woke up again, and the air would be as unpleasant as before. He guessed that Ma Jing must have felt cold in the night and thus closed the window.

On the afternoon of that day, Ma Jing said to Zhang Xiaohua mysteriously, "Xiaohua, do you think that my feet is smelly?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied awkwardly, "Only a little bit, but not too smelly."

Ma Jing nodded his head and said, "I know this, but you do not have to worry about it from today on."

“Really?” Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to believe his words, “You will start washing your feet?”

“No.” Ma Jing shook his head and said, “I have raised this matter to brother Xi and he said that he allows you to move to his room.”

“Is that true? Brother Xi said that to you?” Zhang Xiaohua asked.

“Mm, is true, that is what brother Xi said.” Ma Jing nodded his head and replied confidently.

Zhang Xiaohua said gratefully, “Brother Ma, you are such a kind person, thank you.”

Ma Jing laughed and did not say anything else, then went out to work in the medicinal fields.

Zhang Xiaohua packed his belongings in the afternoon, which consists of just the small knapsack and the roll of bedsheets. The rooms in the courtyards were always left unlocked so Zhang Xiaohua moved all his belongings onto Tian Zhongxi’s empty bed in that evening.

When Ma Jing and the rest returned to their rooms before dinner, Zhang Xiaohua did not see Tian Zhongxi and did not get the chance to thank the latter, so he followed Ma Jing as they went to the canteen to eat.

While they were eating, Tian Zhongxi entered the room with his body full of dust as though he did not wash up, sat down immediately to pick up his chopsticks and ate hurriedly. The people at his side asked softly, “Brother Xi, the water there has not been settled yet?”

Tian Zhongxi murmured with his mouth full, “Mm, it is not done yet. I will have to return in a short while.”

Zhang Xiaohua saw that he was busy and did not went up immediately. Just as Tian Zhongxi was about to leave, he went over and said, “Brother Xi, thank you. I have put my bedsheets on the bed for now.”

Tian Zhongxi was surprised and he asked, “Thank me for what? Where did you put the bedsheets?”

Zhang Xiaohua said curiously, “Brother Xi, didn’t you let me stay in your room?”

I have put my bedsheets onto the empty bed there.”

Upon hearing his reply, Tian Zhongxi’s face sunk and he said, “When did I ever allow you to stay in my room? Is other people’s room somewhere you can barge into so casually?”

After finishing his sentence, he hurried off without listening to Zhang Xiaohua’s explanation.

EN: MC just ignore that dumb...

Chapter 78: Medicinal field

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Medicinal field

Tian Zhongxi's response struck into Zhang Xiaohua's heart like thunder, how... how could this be? Zhang Xiaohua turned back to look at Ma Jing and saw the latter eating happily as though he has already taken little Red Peach as a concubine, his smile was wide and burrowed into his face. From the light of the dinner hall lamp, one could see the excitement in his eyes and the touch of flush on his forehead.

Zhang Xiaohua immediately understood the situation and his heart flared into a thousand flames. Even though he was a child from the village without much experience in the world, he was not willing to be make a fool of or be bullied. He had not scolded Ma Jing, and at most persuaded the latter to wash his feet for the sake of his own hygiene. To be played out like a fool while causing Tian Zhongxi to have a bad impression of him was too evil for a prank.

Zhang Xiaohua clenched his teeth and rolled his fists and walked towards Ma Jing. However, upon his second step, a thought suddenly flew into his head as he looked at Ma Jing's unconcerned expression. If he were to confront Ma Jing like this, the latter could simply deny everything, and the surrounding people were usually rogue-like who cannot distinguish good from bad themselves, how could he expect anyone to stand up in his defense? Even if he were to go over and beat Ma Jing up, then what? Wouldn't he be chased out even before he could learn any martial arts?

The few questions that popped into his head made Zhang Xiaohua calm down. He gave one last look towards Ma Jing and went back to his seat to eat quietly.

All of his motions were missed by the group of azure robed men with little

hats, the exception being Ma Jing who was peeping from the corner of his eyes. However, the middle aged man in well-fitted attire could hear the conversation clearly, and he could personally see Zhang Xiaohua's response and final decision. He retracted his gaze after Zhang Xiaohua returned to his seat and continued his own meal.

After dinner, Zhang Xiaohua returned to Tian Zhongxi's room to collect his belongings and moved them back to the room he shared with Ma Jing. However, Zhang Xiaohua did not stupidly ask the latter for the reason behind his prank. He also did not listen to Ma Jing's chatter in the night, and instead walked about casually in the courtyard while deep in thought.

Even though this matter was not large, it gave Zhang Xiaohua an invaluable lesson, and made him learn that there were all sorts of people in the world. There was not just either harmony or hatred between two people but many different types of complex relationships. Different people would have different ways of handling things, some may be kind, others may have ill intents, and one will not know a person's heart even if he is a close acquaintance. Thus, he had to carefully analyze the other party's words no matter whom he was speaking to, because bad people will not go around with the word "bad" on their faces.

Ever since that day, Zhang Xiaohua would open the window in the room before he slept even if it rained.

After a few more days, Zhang Xiaohua's lazy idle days came to an end. Zhang Xiaohua was not pleased living in other people's jealousy, so he was very happy when Tian Zhongxi assigned him his first task.

His task may be difficult to the other azure robed servants, but it was a piece of cake to someone like Zhang Xiaohua who had grown up in the fields of his village.

In the morning of that day, Zhang Xiaohua put on the azure shirt and little hat which Tian Zhongxi gave him and walked spiritedly out of the room behind Ma Jing. His duty was to learn from Ma Jing the ropes of tending to herbs in the field.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's happy expression, Ma Jing could not help but secretly despise the latter. This kind of person who came from the village and whose hands would itch from not working for a day was born to tend the fields for the rest of his life, and when he thought of the prank he played on Zhang Xiaohua a

few days ago and the latter's beaten down expression, Ma Jing felt happy inside. Who says that I, Ma Jing, am the most easy to prank person in Huanxi mountain villa? Isn't there a new mudbag from the village who just got pranked by me?

It was fine to despise Zhang Xiaohua and play pranks on him, but Ma Jing would not dare to extend his jokes into their duties. Ma Jing would meticulously tell Zhang Xiaohua what to do, and what to look out for because he was aware of the importance of each herb. If he was not serious or unintentionally left something out, Zhang Xiaohua would not be the only one to blame if something were to happen. Ma Jing was clearly aware of his responsibilities and he would not dare to have any ill intention.

Zhang Xiaohua naturally did not know Ma Jing's thoughts and he originally thought that herbs would be difficult to look after. However, as he listened to Ma Jing's explanation while they were walking over, he realized that they were basically the same steps and he carefully noted down the minute differences in his head. To him, it was just using a smaller hoe and spade to loosen the earth, and when Ma Jing questioned Zhang Xiaohua the next day, he was pleased with the latter's answer and performance later in the fields.

Hence, another two days passed like that. Ma Jing informed Tian Zhongxi that Zhang Xiaohua could be left to work along without supervision. Zhong Tianxi was unsure of what he heard, his new recruits had taken a much longer time to become familiar with their duties before their supervisor's would let them work along, was this Ma Jing fooling around? Thinking back to Ma Jing's usual actions, he reconfirmed his suspicion.

However, when he took Zhang Xiaohua for a day, he realized that the latter really knew his job and felt guilty at suspecting Ma Jing. When he questioned Zhang Xiaohua thoroughly, he learnt that the reason for Zhang Xiaohua's smooth transition was because there was not much difference between herb fields and crop fields. The previous servants in Huanxi mountain villa were recruited from people who lived in or near Pingyang city and all had some connections with them, when would they ever spare a glance towards to poor farmers' children? Zhang Xiaohua was the only exception, he was from a poor family and had worked in the fields since young, whereas his group of azure robed subordinates with little hats was from families whose ambitions were

higher, when would they ever go onto the fields? Thus, it resulted in them feeling that working in the medicinal field was complex and tough.

After realizing all these, Tian Zhongxi could not help but sigh, humans are really inflexible by nature.

After then, Zhang Xiaohua finally left his idle days and returned to the familiar fields. His little medicinal hoe and spade looked somewhat cute and was much easier to use than the large hoe he had at home. Zhang Xiaohua's strength was also no longer the same, and thus he could complete a day's worth of work easily. That day was truly comfortable for Zhang Xiaohua.**

However, there was another thing that would make Zhang Xiaohua excited waiting for him later.

In the morning of that day, Zhang Xiaohua was looking at the middle aged man in well-fitted attire practicing his martial arts again. However, the person did not leave immediately after he was done, instead he walked over to Zhang Xiaohua's front and said, "You are Zhang Xiaohua right."

Zhang Xiaohua blinked and nodded, and he heard a sentence which would made him overjoyed. "Young lady has passed down instructions for me to teach you martial arts when I have the time."

Zhang Xiaohua dropped his jaw and said, "Really?"

The person smiled and said, "Really. I am He Tianshu, you can call me squad leader He. Wait here for me after dinner, I will begin my lessons tonight."

Zhang Xiaohua was dazed from happiness again.

He Tianshu saw that Zhang Xiaohua did not reply him and guessed the latter's feelings, so he patted his shoulders again and turned around, leaving Zhang Xiaohua behind to slowly digest this piece of long-awaited news.

This young lady is truly a good person, Zhang Xiaohua almost wanted to charge into the inner courtyard to give his thanks to the young lady. However, when he thought of the complex routes inside, wouldn't he be mistaken as an intruder if he took a misstep and lose his way? Hence, he extinguished the idea. In short, he was grateful beyond words toward OuYan, and this young lady whose name he was not aware of was put onto the same pedestal as sister-in-law Liu in his heart.

The whole of the day was spent in excitement and anticipation for the evening, he almost made some mistakes in the fields but this made Zhang Xiaohua controlled his feelings and concentrate on his work. How could this little first step towards learning martial arts make Zhang Xiaohua lose his bearings? Be serious, be serious. Zhang Xiaohua cautioned himself as he worked, but whenever he looked up in the sky, he would wonder why the sun was taking so long to set.

After a long and exhausting wait, the sun finally set and Tian Zhongxi's voice could be heard from afar. Zhang Xiaohua immediately rushed out of the medicinal field and had left all the caution and concentration back in the fields. Evidently, Zhang Xiaohua is still far from reaching the stage of controlling his emotions in times of joy and sadness.

Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly finished his dinner and reached the main entrance very early. The moonlight was like water but Zhang Xiaohua's feelings were like a waterfall rushing down, it was that agitated because a wish from who knows how long ago is finally going to be fulfilled. Why has that He Tianshu not arrived yet? He seemed to have almost finished his meal during dinner time earlier, and would usually leave early immediately after finishing his meal yet why is he so slow today?

Zhang Xiaohua paced back and forth under the moonlight as he waited anxiously.

After an unknown period of time, he finally heard footsteps coming from the courtyard. Zhang Xiaohua quickly went over to welcome the newcomer, and it was indeed He Tianshu. Zhang Xiaohua said happily, "Squad leader He, you have arrived."

He Tianshu looked at Zhang Xiaohua and said in a solemn voice, "Xiaohua, even though I am teaching you martial arts, I will not be your martial arts master, and squad master is only a kind of address, do you understand?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head vigorously and He Tianshu continued, "Then the first thing I will tell you today is that martial arts require a peaceful heart to train. Look at yourself now, do you think you are in the correct mindset to learn martial arts?"

Zhang Xiaohu immediately understood many things when he heard the other party's words. Indeed, what has become of him today to be consumed by happiness? He immediately focused on his emotions and said to He Tianshu in a natural tone, "Thank you for your advice."

At that moment, He Tianshu nodded his head in satisfaction and said, "This is good, no matter what happens in the future, you will have to be like an ancient well that does not shake no matter the water level alright. Come over here with me."

Chapter 79: Horse stance

Translator : Casualtranslator

Proofreader: Conan143

This marks the last chapter of the day.

Enjoy

Horse stance

He Tianshu brought Zhang Xiaohua to a spacious area and asked, "Xiaohua, I have heard that you have no experience in martial arts."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and replied, "Yes, I have not learnt any before."

He Tianshu asked again, "Your strength is quite good right."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded again and said, "Yes, I did not realize it before but ever since the New Year, my strength has grown larger and larger. I even lift a stone weight in the Lotus escort which people said as five hundred jin heavy."

He Tianshu said, "Good, now try and throw a punch towards me."

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and asked, "With all my strength?"

He Tianshu said, "Yes, it is alright. Use your full power and don't be afraid of hurting me."

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Understood, please be careful."

After he replied, Zhang Xiaohua took a deep breath, summoned all the energy in his body, raised his right fist and threw it towards He Tianshu's body. He Tianshu saw the oncoming fist and lifted his right palm to face the punch, but he only used twenty percent of his strength thinking that it was more than sufficient.

When the two people's hands collided, He Tianshu realized his mistake and immediately increased his defense by thirty percent of his full strength before

deflecting this punch of Zhang Xiaohua. His body shook a little and his right wrist trembled in numbness while he thought inside, “This Xiaohua truly contains five hundred jin of strength, he is a genius in strength after all.”

Zhang Xiaohua was even more surprised as he thought, “Oh wow, squad leader He is truly awesome. I threw all my power into that fist but his body only shook a little, the difference in knowing and not knowing martial arts is really vast. This cannot do, I must put in my best effort to learn martial arts as well.”

He Tianshu’s right arm was still sore and numb so he could not lift it up easily. He used his left arm to massage it gently and when he saw Zhang Xiaohua’s blatant expression of worship, he was too awkward to continue tending to the pain. Thus, he wrinkled his brow and praised, “Not bad, Xiaohua, your strength is really not small.”

He then patted Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders, stretched his own shoulders and said, “Now I will begin to teach you martial arts.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head excitedly and said, “Thank you, squad leader He.”

He Tianshu smiled and then adopted the horse stance, he said, “Watch my position and learn from it. This is called the horse stance. Come, you try it as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua observed He Tianshu’s posture and followed his actions. He Tianshu stood up and corrected Zhang Xiaohua’s errors before saying, “Good, just do it like this. From today onwards, you will do this for two hours. Continue in this posture and I will come back later.”

After saying his sentence, he left without looking back.

Zhang Xiaohua’s head was a mass of fog, his heart was screaming out non-stop, martial arts, I want to learn martial arts, and I want to learn to punch, why did you make me do this posture and leave?

He Tianshu walked past the outer door and turned back to look at Zhang Xiaohua who was performing the horse stance. With a step, he jumped above and to the other side of the wall and into the darkness, pressed on his arm while breathing cold air through his mouth. He muttered under his breath, “This little

brat, where did he get so much strength from? Seems that it is not just five hundred jin, sigh. Carelessness, carelessness, I almost made a fool of myself. The saying goes: a boat can topple even in a sewer. I definitely cannot give him another chance and beat this kid up well. I will first let him stand like that and kill his esteem until his legs are sore and pain.”

A slight fear pervaded his head as he looked at Zhang Xiaohua before he regained his senses and returned to his room.

Under the light of the oil lamp, he could see that the area below his palm was starting to bruise. He Tianshu could not help but be surprised, he took some medicated oil and rolled on the affected area while he pondered. Honestly, when he first received instructions from young lady Ou, he was reluctant to follow them. He has seen Zhang Xiaohua since the latter’s first day, and his opinion was that he was a simple and honest boy who was inexperienced with the world and hence bullied by the other servants. Even though he felt some pity, it was a normal human emotion and the boy had no relations to him so he was willing to leave it at there. About the matter of teaching a servant martial arts, even though Huanxi mountain villa had no precedence, the villa master had already instructed him so he could do it casually, who couldn’t do some superficial martial arts movement? However, Ou Yan seemed to have saw through his insincerity and had let him know that Zhang Xiaohua could summon five hundred jin of strength in a single arm. Now that he has experienced it firsthand, he felt guilty for not believing the villa owner, and realized that he was actually a frog in its well.

Hence, after some consideration, He Tianshu extinguished the idea of teaching Zhang Xiaohua some superficial martial arts. Instead, he would build a firm foundation by making him do the horse stance, which was also probably the intention of the villa master. Otherwise, she could have just gotten any of his subordinates to teach the boy martial arts, why asked him personally instead?

Seeing the time, He Tianshu got ready to stand up and return to see Zhang Xiaohua’s pitiful figure. When he thought of the first time he did the horse stance, and that wolf of an instructor, he felt fear crawling through his bones. Thus, he sat back down and rubbed his hand which no longer hurt, hehe, he smiled. He would let Zhang Xiaohua suffer a bit more, who asked the boy to

make him lose face? If he did not get even, how would he be qualified to be the boy's master?

However, it never crossed his mind that he was the one who instructed the other party to use his full strength while he used only half of his.

After another bag of smoke worth of time, He Tianshi felt ashamed of himself. Forget it, he would hurry back. It was the boy's first time learning martial arts, he should not go too far and make the boy lose interest in the lessons, otherwise he would not be able to face the villa master.

When He Tianshu walked back to where Zhang Xiaohua was, the scene that greeted him made him surprised. Zhang Xiaohua was not what he imagined the boy would end up as, rolling on the floor like a bag of mud, or shivering in pain as though he twisted his bone and was waiting pitifully to be saved from his situation.

Instead, Zhang Xiaohua's horse stance posture was steady and firm just as how he left him.

He Tianshu also felt joy in his heart, how could this brat be just like him, trying to cheat his teacher but did not even know how to cover up his tracks properly. How can someone hold in the horse stance without feeling sore in his legs, the boy should at least give him some face and pretend to be in pain right?

However, as he thought back to his youth and then to his master, He Tianshu did not point out Zhang Xiaohua's "attempt to cheat".

When Zhang Xiaohua heard He Tianshu returned, he turned his head and asked in concern, "Squad leader He, why did you take so long to come back? Was there something wrong in the food tonight, did your stomach hurt?"

Then, he said while ignoring the other party, "This Huanxi mountain villa is good in every way, except that there are too few latrines. Every day one would need to queue up to go to the latrine, we will need to point out this reasonable suggestion to elder Yu one day so that our living environment will improve, and that will improve our work efficiency as well."

Then, Zhang Xiaohua seemed to have thought of something and he said mysteriously to He Tianshu, "Oh right, squad leader He. If you have such a

problem in the future, you can just go to the fields and not queue there stupidly. That is what I would do when I was at home, the sky is already so dark so nobody would catch you. Furthermore, won't that thing be helpful to plants' growth? You will be doing a service to the mountain villa by doing so."

"Dang" He Tianshu fell onto the ground. Zhang Xiaohua urgently asked, "Squad leader He, squad leader He, are you alright?"

Zhang Xiaohua seemed to want to go over to help He Tianshu up, but because the latter had not given him the permission to do so, he was still holding the horse stance posture and did not dare to relax his body.

He Tianshu flipped like a carp and stood back up. He snapped back, "It's nothing, I just stood on dog poo."

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Oh, so it was like this. Haha, this dog too, why did it not go to the field to do its business because that would save us some trouble as well. Oh right, squad leader He, your movement just now was really cool, when will you teach that to me?"

He Tianshu smiled and said, "No problem, that was called flipping carp, you will learn it one day."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he said, "I was referring to the way you fall, that was called flipping carp? That name is indeed quite weird."

He Tianshu was stunned for a while.

He walked to Zhang Xiaohua's front, back and sides returned to the front again and said, "Xiaohua, your memory is pretty good. After cheating to rest for so long, you could still return to the exact same position that I taught you earlier. Not bad at all. We will end here for today and continue this tomorrow morning."

After finishing his sentence, he walked off without waiting for Zhang Xiaohua to respond, and even yawned as he walked.

He Tianshu thought in his heart, this little brat's answer was as cool as the answer I gave in the past, and he asked without turning his head, "Are your legs sore? Can you still walk?"

After he finished his sentence, he increased his pace and disappeared back into

his room while thinking, “The feeling of having a student is quite fun after all. Wasn’t my teacher smiling like this in the past as well when he walked back to his room?” His face turned red as he got back to his room and thought of his fear of being caught by his master for cheating and being too embarrassed to even lift his head to face him. Now that he thought about it, his master probably knew that he had cheated but chose to ignore it instead. Because of his master’s decision, it gave him the will to put in more effort in his training, so he was sure that Zhang Xiaohua was feeling the same and would be more hardworking the next morning.

However, he did not hear Zhang Xiaohua’s answer which vastly differed from his youth, “Sore legs? My legs are not sore at all. Squad leader He, I am not tired at all and of course I can walk. Don’t run, didn’t you say that you will teach me martial arts? Quickly teach me some fist stance, I am really not tired and can still punch.”

Unfortunately, He Tianshu did not hear any of his words, whereas Zhang Xiaohua praised under his breath, “What a cool qinggong.” Thus, Zhang Xiaohua returned back to his room along to begin his next battle with the foot stench.

Chapter 80: Morning practice

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Morning practice

It was morning on that day, the sky was still dark and heavy but Zhang Xiaohua's mood was bright and light.

Zhang Xiaohua was already waiting at the place where he practiced the horse stance last night and his heart was happily thinking inside, "Squad leader He should be teaching me on how to punch today."

After a while later, He Tianshu walked over and saw Zhang Xiaohua who was waiting for him. He nodded his head delightedly and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, this is not bad at all. You have woken up so early, good, we shall begin today."

Zhang Xiaohua asked, "What fist martial art will you teach me today?"

He Tianshu was surprised, "Fist martial art? Haha, don't be anxious, first get the basics right. This horse stance is used to build your foundation, if your horse stance is not good enough, your lower body will be unsteady. The saying goes 'want to train martial arts, first learn the horse stance' and 'horse stance for three years in the beginning'. As long as your lower body is steady, anything else will be easy to learn."

Zhang Xiaohua opened in mouth in surprise, "What? Hold for three years, then when can I learn anything? Oh right, what is the lower body?"

He Tianshu smiled and said, "Three years is just a saying, but we may still need to learn martial arts while practicing the horse stance. If your horse stance is not good, your martial arts won't be any better. Lower body refers to your body below your waist, only when your two legs are standing firmly on the ground will you not lose the advantage in a fight. Oh right, when you gave me a punch yesterday, even though the strength was quite large, had you noticed my legs? I

was using the horse stance to receive your punch, don't you feel that my body was still stable after being punched? If the lower body is light, I would have fallen back from your punch and you would have gained the advantage to continue attacking until I am defeated. For me to break from your attack to gain the upper hand would be difficult. Understood?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded without really understanding, and then asked meekly, "Squad leader He, what is advantage?"

He Tianshu immediately adopted the horse stance and stood there steadily, he said, "This is a good question, but I will not answer you today. You will understand it slowly in the future, but for now I will have you continue practice your horse stance. Even though it may be hard in the beginning, you will need to endure and not cheat your way out. In the beginning, it is fine to hold up to the time to boil a kettle of tea before resting and continuing again. After one to two months later, once you can hold for a meal worth of time or even better, I will then teach you some fist martial arts."

Zhang Xiaohua asked in joyful surprise, "Squad leader He, you said that I only have to hold for a meal worth of time in the horse stance?"

He Tianshu nodded his head and asked, "Yes, why?"

Zhang Xiaohua continued to ask, "Then, is it breakfast or dinner time?"

He Tianhu understood his student's intention and smiled, he said, "Don't bother about breakfast or dinner. Just hold there until I am satisfied."

Zhang Xiaohua replied bitterly, "Alright, I understand. I will do the horse stance now for you to see."

After finishing his sentence, he faced towards the east, pushed out his chest and placed his hands at his waist, and adopted a steady horse stance. He Tianshu smiled as he watched Zhang Xiaohua's actions, pointed out a few slight mistakes and nodded his head in praise, "Zhang Xiaohua, not bad at all. You could still remember what you learnt yesterday. Let's see how long can you hold, tell me when you are tired and I will let you rest."

Zhang Xiaohua answered in acknowledgement and he kept quiet thereafter. His eyes looked afar into the sky as though he was searching for the sun.

He Tianshu also walked to another side to begin his daily practice, and by this time, the other three men also came out and took their spots to perform their usual routine.

He Tianshu was practicing the thousand leaves fist that day, and when he began to train, he was still watching Zhang Xiaohua from the corner of his eye to wait for the latter to give up so he could rest. However, Zhang Xiaohua did not sound out and as He Tianshu performed more strokes, he immersed himself into the movement and left all the other matters at the back of his head. This thousand leaves fist was quite cumbersome and performing the entire set of actions would consume quite a bit of stamina. When He Tianshu practiced normally, he would have some areas where he was unsatisfied with, but for some reason today, from the very first stroke all the way to the end, his breath and flow was smooth and when He Tianshu released his breath to end the practice, he heard exclamations of praise from the side. He thought, "These bunch of rabbits have improved in their judgement, to be able to see that I have made some advancements in my thousand leaves fist."

While he thought like this inside, he turned his head and said, "You all..." Midway in his sentence, he swallowed the rest of his words.

Why?

There were no one surrounding to watch him, the three men were watching Zhang Xiaohua and his horse stance.

After He Tianshu had performed the thousand leaves fist, he was already standing at some distance from his original position, and while he walked back to where Zhang Xiaohua was holding the horse stance, he could hear from afar, "Do you dare to bet with me? If this Zhang Xiaohua can still stand for two meals worth of time, you will have to wash my socks for three days."

The other person retorted, "You sure are shameless, how about this, I won't take advantage of you. If Zhang Xiaohua can stand this for three meals worth of time, you wash my socks for two days."

The last person replied in disdain, "What are you all pulling, look at the situation. Zhang Xiaohua can hold in this position for the whole morning, who would want to bet this with me?"

Then, the three men said in unison, “Hold it there Zhang Xiaohua, hold it there Zhang Xiaohua.”

He Tianshu walked over and scolded severely, “What are you all doing not practicing your martial arts seriously?”

The three men saw He Tianshu came over and they rushed to explain at the same time.

In reality, while the three men were practicing their martial arts, they already saw Zhang Xiaohua holding the horse stance in his position. Since they all did it before, they did not pay much attention to the boy. However, they were not as engrossed in their practice as He Tianshu and would occasionally peek at the boy to see when he would fall and sit back down. The longer they watched, the more they realized that Zhang Xiaohua was different from them; not only did Zhang Xiaohua slowly lowered his butt until it reached the ground, he maintained his position as though he had been doing so for at least three years. After seeing so, the three men gave up on their practice and surrounded Zhang Xiaohua while asking the boy of his circumstances. Zhang Xiaohua spoke casually as he held the horse stance, his face was not red and his breathing was even as though he was sitting on a real chair. When the three men found out that it was Zhang Xiaohua’s second time doing the horse stance, they were at a loss for words. Since they had nothing to say, they started to cheer the boy on.

He Tianshu looked suspiciously at Zhang Xiaohua and then at the three people, he asked, “Are you sure Zhang Xiaohua did not cheat?”

The three men nodded together with their faces unchanged.

He Tianshu faced Zhang Xiaohua and asked, “Xiaohua, you didn’t cheat while doing the horse stance last night right?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and replied, “Yes, squad leader He. I really did not bluff you, and I did not cheat.”

He Tianshu said seriously, “En, I believe you, Xiaohua. Oh right, are your legs sore now? Is there any part of your body not feeling well?”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a moment and replied, “It is okay, squad leader He. My leg is a little tired, but the rest of my body feels fine.”

He Tianshu pondered and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, if I make you hold this horse stance continuously, how long do you think you can hold for?”

Zhang Xiaohua thought about it and answered, “Probably until afternoon I guess, I still feel quite good.”

He Tianshu’s face changed its color and just as he was about to speak, Zhang Xiaohua saw He Tianshu’s change in expression and quickly said, “Squad leader He, about this, if I really tried I will be able to hold on longer, even holding until nighttime would be possible. In that case, you can start teaching me fist stance right.”

He Tianshu’s face darkened even more and he asked solemnly, “Zhang Xiaohua, be honest with me. You have really not learnt any martial arts before, not even the horse stance?”

Zhang Xiaohua maintained the horse stance as he did not dare to move, and said urgently, “Yes, squad leader He. Before I met you, I really did not learn any martial arts before. The first time I heard of this horse stance was when you said it to me.”

He Tianshu thought for a while and indeed, when he thought Zhang Xiaohua last night, the latter’s movements was rigid and unfamiliar with the horse stance position. Furthermore, there was no benefit in lying about not having any martial arts experience, since having some is better than having none at all.

Suddenly, a thought struck onto He Tianshu like lightning, “Could this Zhang Xiaohua be a martial arts genius?!” However, when he looked at Zhang Xiaohua’s average appearance, childish expression and slightly thin frame, they somehow do not match up to the two words “genius”.

It was the first time He Tianshu suspected his judgment was wrong, “Aren’t geniuses supposed to be like jade trees in the wind?”

Just as He Tianshu was thinking, the person at the side said, “Squad leader He, it is time to eat. If not, it will affect our morning duties.”

He Tianshu nodded his head and said, “Alright, You all hurry to the canteen, work is more important. If something happens to those herbs, we will all be implicated.”

After saying his sentence, he brought everyone to the courtyard and then to the canteen, leaving behind Zhang Xiaohua who was still in the horse stance position as he cried out, “Squad leader He, I am hungry too, what should I do?”

The He Tianshu who had already entered the courtyard slapped his forehead and said, “I have actually forgotten about Zhang Xiaohua.”

He quickly yelled back, “Xiaohua..... you can count to have passed the test. Hurry eat your breakfast and we will talk later at night.”

Zhang Xiaohua heeded the man’s instructions and ran like a rabbit out of its burrow behind the four men to the canteen, his body seemingly fine even after the exercise.

In the canteen, the azure robed men with little hats were almost done with their breakfast, and when they saw Zhang Xiaohua rushed over, they seemed to be happy over his misfortune. When Zhang Xiaohua sat down and even before he picked up his chopsticks, Tian Zhongxi walked over and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, I know that you are young and are in the period of growth, so it is normally to want to sleep more. However, you should have some self-discipline, do not wake up too late. I will not blame you this time round, but if you are late again in the future, I will deduct it from your pay. Understood?”

Zhang Xiaohua was about to explain, “I...”

Tian Zhongxi immediately said, “Do not give me any excuse, being lazy is just that. I have heard it all from Ma Jing so do not find any more excuses, I hope you will correct your behavior in the future, and be a good servant in the Huanxi mountain villa.”

EN: This dumbass....MC you better need to shut his mouth.

Then, he patted Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders and walked off.

Zhang Xiaohua turned his gaze to Ma Jing who flashed him a smile, put down his chopsticks and left the canteen.

Zhang Xiaohua wondered, “I have been stepping on toes wherever I go unintentionally. I only just arrived, and want to learn martial arts. Why does this Ma Jing keep bullying me?”

Chapter 81: Hope

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Hope

After mixing with these azure robed servants with little hats, Zhang Xiaohua naturally understood their thoughts. Some of these people were born in servitude in Huanxi mountain villa, whereas the others were sent as children from Pingyang city's neighboring households by their families for money. Life in the mountain villa was quite boring, and their hearts would become empty after a long time. The rules in Huanxi mountain villa were strict, none would dare to flout any of them outright, although that did not exempt them from partaking in sneaky actions.

Ma Jing probably belonged to that group of people whose hearts were empty. He was usually bullied in front of his peers, so upon seeing the more recently arrived Zhang Xiaohua, how could he let him off that easily? He would naturally find ways to tease him and gain enjoyment from it, but Zhang Xiaohua has set his mind on learning martial arts so where would he find the time to entertain the jokes and pranks of such people? The swan is not bothered by the sparrows, Zhang Xiaohua has not kept any of these pranks into his heart, and unknowingly, he has dug the hearts of these people and already started to put them beneath his notice.

Zhang Xiaohua was not aware of his own changes. Actually in the cases of most changes, the observer outside would have a clearer picture than the changing person himself. As the saying goes, cities are built by the sages, and Zhang Xiaohua could not be bothered to engage himself in the small plays among these greasy kittens.

On that dark cloudy day, Zhang Xiaohua spent his time meaningfully by keeping himself busy with work. The excitement from yesterday had already

subsided, even though only one night has passed since then, one falls greater when his expectations are higher. Zhang Xiaohua did not expect that the martial arts he was looking forward to so much would require him to begin from the horse stance. It was truly a case of guessing the journey but not guessing the beginning. However, this horse stance was too easy, how could it be considered as martial arts?

At least, he had finally seen a shadow of his dream being realized, and Zhang Xiaohua naturally dropped the burden which he had carried for so long as he waited patiently for He Tianshu's arrangements.

The person whose feelings were of opposite of Zhang Xiaohua was He Tianshu. Yesterday, He Tianshu did not put the matter of teaching martial arts to the boy in his eyes, he thought it was a ripple in his life which could fade into oblivion. However, upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua's performance in the horse stance yesterday, his heart made a three hundred and sixty degrees turn.

Even though Tian Zhongxi and his group of azure robed little hats men were envious of He Tianshu and the other's life, and wanted to enjoy their perks, He Tianshu himself had a basin full of bitterness which he did not know when it would be emptied. As long as there were people in this Huanxi mountain villa, the people would be discontented, and if people were discontented then they would become prickly and petty. Piaomiao sect's disciples' pettiness was no different from the other servants, and He Tianshu was a warrior who battled with this every day.

Even though it seemed easy, and there is no need to talk about the upper echelons of the Piaomiao sect, but for the other members like He Tianshu who looked like they have luxurious and glorious lives to outsiders, they had their own difficulties. Following their own personality and disposition, they were split into several personal factions, and among these factions, the most important thing would be martial arts. If one had profound martial arts, he would not need to grovel before other people's legs, and could instead extend his own legs for other people to grovel before. Those who were not as good with martial arts would have to count on their personal connections, but like everything that happened in Jianghu, in the sect, and on earth would have their own price.

For someone with a common personality and ordinary aptitude towards

martial arts like He Tianshu, they had nothing to bring out from themselves and could even rely less on their connections. They were not willing to bootlick, they were not opportunistic, and they could not gain the favors of their superiors, so they only had a few buddies in the sect to enjoy meat, wine and perhaps a little boasting. When Huanxi mountain villa needed servants, who will the sect send? Of course it would be He Tianshu types of people who do not have close relationships with the majority. It might be called an important task entrusted by the sect to only the trustworthy and reliable people, but in actual fact, the job was only slightly more than glorified servants who still had to work in the fields.

After working in the medicinal fields for several months and not even seeing someone like Zhang Chengyue to come over and inspect their progress, how could the task be considered as important to the sect? In the end, they had to rely on themselves to make a miracle to elevate their positions even further in the sect so they would not need to continue working on the fields and stay as a farmer. A father reaping his son's fortune was common logic, and a master enjoying his disciple's glory was the same. Now when he thought about it, He Tianshu regretted making Zhang Xiaohua call him "Squad leader He" and not master so that this genius disciple would not leave his own palm.

However, who would have spared a second glance at Zhang Xiaohua's ordinary appearance.

Regarding Zhang Xiaohu's training in the martial arts, He Tianshu was also in a dilemma. Martial arts could be divided into internal and external martial arts, and the saying goes, "Inner training from a breath, external training on the bones, tendons and skins". No matter what martial art it was, there would be some requirement to learn it. For example, in the case of internal martial arts, inner energy would have to be cultivated using some inner energy cultivation art, but He Tianshu's own inner energy cultivation was ordinary and his cultivation technique was but one of the normal ones that could be found in Piaomiao sect. Even if this was the case, all cultivation techniques could only be taught within the sect, and imparting it to Zhang Xiaohua was something harshly prohibited. If found, not only would Zhang Xiaohua's inner cultivation be wrecked, even he might face expulsion from the sect. Another thing was that these cultivation arts had to be cultivated since young when the body's meridians were not fully

developed yet, so that the meridians would be molded by the training and become thicker for a better foundation in the future. For Zhang Xiaohua whose meridians had already developed, it was hard for him to have any further advances in the internal martial arts.

Thus, He Tianshu did not consider this path of internal martial arts for long, and that left external martial arts. External martial arts practitioners could train their bodies to a certain degree so that they would not lose out in strength to an inner martial arts practitioner, like in the case of Shi Niu whose age was younger than He Tianshu, but someone like He Tianshu could never compare to such people. However, external martial arts also had a requirement to reach greater heights, Shi Niu was tall and large even when in his youth and his muscle density was unordinary. Looking at Zhang Xiaohua, it was highly unlikely that he satisfied the requirements. There was also an important point, external martial arts practitioners had to rely on external aids like medicine to stimulate their bodies, and if you think about it, wouldn't that also imply that any further growth would depend on stronger external aids to stimulate the body further? The body which had been stimulated would also need herbs to maintain, and only through this process of stimulating and maintaining could external martial arts practitioners improve their prowess. If you only relied on the stimulants, then one can wait to collect their corpse; they simply had no chance to enter the Jianghu.

Even in the case of Shi Niu, he had to rely on some power to enjoy the herbs and medicine, if not why would there be a saying "the poor pursues literature and the rich pursues martial arts?" It was precisely for this reason.

After thinking about it, He Tianshu's head was in turmoil. Even though there were many herbs in Huanxi mountain villa, they were all reserved for Piaomiao sect's exclusive use. He would not have the guts to steal any. Furthermore, even if he could take some, this type of herbs would have to be consumed not just once or twice, and he could not afford to steal some every day.

With so many thoughts and troubles in his head, how could He Tianshu be calm?

He Tianshu's thoughts could not settle on a solution all the way until after dinner time when he reached the usual place where he trained Zhang Xiaohua,.

However, he still had time to consider since Zhang Xiaohua was still not there yet. He Tianshu was slightly surprised, what was this brat up to? He was still filled with excitement last night, so why was he slackened so much over one day? He could not let this go, the boy was going to be He Tianshu's insurance for the future, so the former would have to hold on to this opportunity tightly. Just as he began to look around to find Zhang Xiaohua, He Tianshu heard the running footsteps coming closer towards him, and when he turned his eyes to looked, it was indeed Zhang Xiaohua who had arrived.

When Zhang Xiaohua ran to his front, He Tianshu steeled his expression and asked solemnly, "Zhang Xiaohua, why are you late today? Is it because you feel that my training is too easy, or do you think that martial arts are easy to learn?"

Zhang Xiaohua saw that He Tianshu was upset so he quickly explained, "Squad leader He, it is not like that. I did not have any of these intentions, but was delayed because brother Xi instructed me to do some other things."

Upon hearing his reply, He Tianshu's wrinkle smoothened and he nodded in approval. He said, "Mm, alright. If there is nothing in the future, you would have to come earlier. As the saying goes, 'each cun of time is a cun of gold', the more time you spend on learning martial arts, the further you will be able to go."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head seriously and replied, "I understand, squad leader He."

He Tianshu continued, "Then we shall begin for today. First adopt a horse stance position."

After saying his sentence, He Tianshu also switched to the horse stance so Zhang Xiaohua did not hesitate and immediately split his legs apart, positioned both hands to his waist and bent down, adopting a steady and firm horse stance.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's horse stance, He Tianshu did not waste any time and taught him the points to note and the benefits of the horse stance. After he was done, He Tianshu asked, "You should be clear by now, do you feel your lower body stabilizing?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head in agreement, and He Tianshu continued to ask, "Is your waist sore or does your legs hurt?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Not at all, I feel the same as usual.”

He Tianshu gave a silent approval inside; his student was indeed a genius.

Then, he said, “Alright, you can get up.”

Zhang Xiaohua stood up naturally without any pain as though he just got up from a chair, and He Tianshu nodded in approval again when he saw it.

Then, He Tianshu asked, “You have not learned any fist martial arts?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Not before, but I have seen people performing the sixth fist martial art in Lotus escort.”

He Tianshu nodded and asked, “Do you still remember it, can you show it to me?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered, “No problem”

After replying the other party, Zhang Xiaohua adopted the sixth fist martial art’s initial position and was about to begin his performance.

Chapter 82: Disappointment

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Disappointment

After He Tianshu waited for a while, he still did not see Zhang Xiaohua move and could not help but ask curiously, "What is the matter, Zhang Xiaohua, why haven't you started?"

Zhang Xiaohua faced him and replied apologetically, "Squad leader He, sorry but I have forgotten it."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "No problem, this sixth fist is a complex set of fist movements, forgetting is a normal thing. We will assume that you have not learnt it before, and I will teach you the basic Rohan fist. Watch me as I demonstrate it once."

Then, he began to display the entire set of Rohan fists stance and after he was done, he asked Zhang Xiaohua, "Do you understand?"

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and said, "No, you were too fast for me to see clearly."

He Tianshu smiled and performed the same set of actions in a slower pace, then asked Zhang Xiaohua again, "Did you see it clearly this time?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, "I did."

He Tianshu asked, "Can you show it to me?"

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head again and said, "I could not remember."

He Tianshu nodded and said, "Alright, I will do it again and you will copy my movements this time."

After finishing his sentence and without waiting for Zhang Xiaohua to respond,

he began to perform the same set of actions. Zhang Xiaohua stood by his side and tried to mimic the same sets of movements and after He Tianshu was done, Zhang Xiaohua finished as well.

He Tianshu asked again, "So how was it, could you remember?"

Zhang Xiaohua closed his eyes and pondered, he then said, "Squad leader He, can you do it again so I can learn from you?"

He Tianshu agreed, "Alright."

Then, he slowly performed the stance again, and his speed was even slower than before and Zhang Xiaohua repeated his motions by the side.

He Tianshu saw the Zhang Xiaohua was done so he said, "Zhang Xiaohua, do it again on your own and let me see it."

Zhang Xiaohua closed his eyes and searched within his memory, he positioned his hands and began to perform the Rohan fist as he could remember. However, he stopped halfway through and said sheepishly, "Squad leader He, I have forgotten, can you do it again?"

He Tianshu was slightly exasperated but he patiently performed it again in an even slower pace. Zhang Xiaohua carefully followed his motions but when he tried it himself again, he only remembered a few more stances than his previous attempt. Thus, he asked again, "Squad leader He, I still cannot remember, can you do it again?"

By this time, He Tianshu's furrow between his brows became even deeper, he did not perform the complete set of actions again, but instead continued from where Zhang Xiaohua stopped. Stroke by stroke, he directed Zhang Xiaohua until his whole body was filled with sweat, and was even more exhausted than exchanging pointers with someone else.

Thinking that Zhang Xiaohua must have learnt it all by then, He Tianshu instructed Zhang Xiaohua to demonstrate the Rohan fist from beginning to end, but halfway through, the latter stopped and scratched his head apologetically. Just as he was about to speak, He Tianshu broke first and said, "Did you forget again, and you need me to demonstrate again?"

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned red and he replied, "Yes."

He Tianshu sighed out deeply and said, "This will be the last time." Then, he continued his method of teaching Zhang Xiaohua stroke by stroke as he went through all the movements. Then, he sighed in relief and asked, "You should have learnt it by now right."

Zhang Xiaohua strained to nod his head so He Tianshu said, "Then go ahead."

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua performed the Rohan fist again. The looks on his face was serious, and fortunately he did not stop where he last forgotten, and smoothly went past that part like flowing clouds and water, but his momentum did not continue for long. Two to three strokes later, Zhang Xiaohua stopped again and peeked at He Tianshu as though he wanted to say something. The pitiful He Tianshu was almost driven crazy and he said, "Did you forget it again, and need me to demonstrate?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head cheerfully.

He Tianshu was at a loss for words, he pointed to Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Zhang Xiaohua-ah, Zhang Xiaohua, are you a genius or an idiot? There are only eighteen stances in this Rohan fist, and is considered the simple entry level martial art. Smarter people are able to pick it up after one demonstration, and even for me whom my master called a stupid as a bull took four tries before I could perform it from start to end without any reminders. You... you have taken five tries, so why do you only remember eleven stances?"

Zhang Xiaohua answered carefully, "Squad leader He, you have displayed it six times."

He Tianshu ignored his words and continued, "When other people learn martial arts, they find the horse stance most difficult yet you don't even require any practice and can hold it longer than I. I have trained this horse stance for who knows how long and could still remember how difficult it was but you easily passed this obstacle so calling you a genius would not be far-fetched. Yet why is it so difficult for you to learn fist stances? Fine, I won't say anymore, I will perform the sixth demonstration, which will also be my last."

Zhang Xiaohua corrected him again, "Squad leader He, it would be your seventh demonstration."

He Tianshu waved his hand and said, "I don't care if it is the seventh or eighth,

this will be the very last one.”

After finishing his sentence, he performed it painfully slowly, like a snail crawling on a leaf before sighing out deeply and looking at Zhang Xiaohua. Zhang Xiaohua closed his eyes and pondered for quite a while before he entered the first stance. However, good news did not come to He Tianshu because when Zhang Xiaohua reached the thirteenth stance, he stopped again and did not continue any further. Zhang Xiaohua looked at He Tianshu and opened his mouth, but no words could come out.

Seeing the inconvenienced look on Zhang Xiaohua’s face, He Tianshu felt as if there were a thousand grievances in his heart, and he did not know what to say. Instead, he walked off while thinking of the same old phrase: the higher the expectations, the greater the fall.

He Tianshu saw in Zhang Xiaohua an opportunity for himself to advance, but after seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s aptitude in martial arts, he could only blame himself for having eyes but did not see.

In the night, the Zhang Xiaohua who was left behind by a wave from He Tianshu stood there awkwardly. He clenched his teeth as he watched the disappearing back of He Tianshu, but did not follow behind. Instead, he frowned and tried to recall for a long time. Then, he entered the horse stance again and began to perform the Rohan fist. Up to one point, he stopped, having forgotten the rest. Hence, he stood there to recall again, continued to perform it, and stopped midway again. If He Tianshu saw Zhang Xiaohua repeating these set of motions for several cycles, his nose would have definitely flared in anger, because Zhang Xiaohua performed up to the thirteen stance on the first cycle, tenth stance on the second cycle, ninth stance on the third cycle. In short, he forgot more the more he practiced until he reached the sixth stance where he did not forget any more.

This kind of aptitude, sigh. The sigh did not come from He Tianshu who had already left long before, but it came from elder Yu who was standing on a wall faraway. He shook his head and thought, even if the boy had one thousand jin of strength, what would be the use?

The elder Yu who had come secretly to watch their training left feeling

disappointed.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua was left truly alone this time as he kept repeating the motions up to the sixth stance in fear of forgetting another stance.

Knowing that it had gotten really late, Zhang Xiaohua could not endure it any longer and he went back to his room to sleep. The room smelt the same as usual, and Zhang Xiaohua shook his head before opening the windows.

Strangely, although it was already May and the room was warm and stuffy without the opened windows, Ma Jing continued to close his windows every day which made Zhang Xiaohua stumped.

While lying on his bed, Zhang Xiaohua's head was still full of the stances of the Rohan fist, but it was always up to the sixth stance as he tossed and turned before falling asleep eventually.

In the middle of the night, the bright flashing lights did not miss their appointment with Zhang Xiaohua at his dreamland, but Zhang Xiaohua did not seem to notice that the flickering lights had appeared on his four limbs.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua was the first one again to reach the place where they trained their martial arts. He naturally displayed the Rohan fist, mm, the first six stances of the Rohan fist to be accurate. Zhang Xiaohua still felt satisfied with himself because he had not forgotten any more stances over the night.

However, when He Tianshu arrived, he was not as satisfied as Zhang Xiaohua as the latter was of himself.

He Tianshu's eyes were red as if he did not get a good night rest, probably because he was busy thinking for a long time. Evidently, people will lose sleep when they were bothered or unhappy.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua demonstrate the first six, no, it was five and a half stances of the Rohan fist, He Tianshu's heart itched to give the former a good kick in his butt. Before he left the night, Zhang Xiaohua could still perform up to the thirteenth stance, why was it only up to five and a half stance now? The fifth stance should be to turn his body to the right and raise his left elbow up while the right arm would form a fist to punch down and towards the front, but Zhang

Xiaohua has kept his left elbow down and his right hands punched upwards like a firing cannon, sigh, it could only be considered half a stance.

He Tianshu was speechless, he had taught him each hand movement one by one over six times, no seven times and the boy actually forgotten up to the fifth stance on the next day. Furthermore, the other five stances had some variations from the original stance, his aptitude was truly one in a hundred.

He Tianshu shook his head and was about to walk over to aside to continue his own training, but when he saw Zhang Xiaohua peeking at him through the corner of his eyes as well as the latter's diligence in trying, He Tianshu's heart eventually softened. "Never mind, even though the villa master instructed me to teach him martial arts, she did not request me to teach the boy personally." Thus, he pointed to a disciple who just walked out of the courtyard and said, "You, go over and teach Zhang Xiaohua the Rohan fist."

The disciple was surprised and he turned to see Zhang Xiaohua stumbling over the first five stances, he could not help but blurt out a laugh. Seeing He Tianshu's gaze meeting his eyes, he quickly wiped off the smile and ran over to tell Zhang Xiaohua to stop. Then, he displayed the Rohan fist from beginning to end once.

He Tianshu was looking over as he trained, but he later engrossed himself in his own practice. The reason was because Zhang Xiaohua had fumbled like he did the night before.

When it was time to eat breakfast, Zhang Xiaohua had only learnt up to the tenth stance, and that disciple was still patiently explaining and demonstrating the movements again. Seeing the sweat that glittered across the disciple's forehead, Zhang Xiaohua said apologetically, "Thanks you for your trouble."

The disciple smiled bitterly and said, "It is okay, treat it as me reliving my old memories."

However, he thought bitterly inside, "If I were to teach Zhang Xiaohua like this for the next few days, this Rohan fist would become his own personal specialty, because the Piaomiao sect would not have another disciple who practiced the Rohan fist as many time as he did."

Chapter 83: Genius

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Genius

There was no need to comment how tough the day of work was, but for Zhang Xiaohua who had already gotten used to it, he did not feel fatigue at all. However, he was unable to stop thinking of the Rohan fist which was indeed very consuming for him to learn.

Unfortunately when it came to his evening training, he had made the disciple who taught him in the morning speechless as well, Zhang Xiaohua could actually forget everything after the sixth stance again, and only the first sixth stance remained in his head!

The disciple reported back to He Tianshu resentfully that he did not have the ability to teach martial arts to the boy. No matter how dumb a person was, he should have remembered what was taught to him in the morning and the previous night but why could this Zhang Xiaohua not recall anything at all? The disciple could not forsake all his training time just to teach Zhang Xiaohua the Rohan fist right?

He Tianshu pondered and clenched his teeth to say, "You will teach him again for tonight, and I will switch you out with someone else the next day. I refuse to believe that the four of us will not be able to teach him the Rohan fist."

During that night, the results were rather fruitful because after the disciple has demonstrated the Rohan fist step by step for seven to eight times, Zhang Xiaohua was able to perform up to the sixteenth stance in front of He Tianshu. The other Piaomiao disciples who were watching from aside were all thinking the same thought, "Effort does not fail the person with the determination, even a metal rod could be ground down into a needle, the ancient sayings hold some

truth to them after all.”

While everyone returned to their rooms after admiring the results of the training and feeling the satisfaction of being a teacher, Zhang Xiaohua stayed behind and continued to perform the entire set of Rohan fist again and again. However, after an unknown number of repetitions, Zhang Xiaohua began to forget the stances one by one again. The pitiful Zhang Xiaohua was at a loss on what to do, he could neither continue to train nor stop training as he was afraid of forgetting more stances if he did either.

In the end, he chose to go back to the horse stance position.

By the time the night became deeper, he reluctantly returned to his room.

The depressed Zhang Xiaohua did not know that a pair of eyes was watching him throughout his practice; the one-armed elder Yu had come again to observe the boy.

In the morning of the second day, Zhang Xiaohua’s Rohan fist struck heavily onto the determination of the Piaomiao sect members, the confidence of being a teacher which had grown as steady as a tree from the first day came tumbling down. He Tianshu looked at Zhang Xiaohua five and a half stance of Rohan fist that were full of mistakes and he swapped out another disciple. The unfortunate disciple went over like a boat in still waters, he almost sang out a song of “Travelling on sea in the frozen waters of winter.”

The morning practice went the same as last night causing He Tianshu to be speechless. Genius-ah, this is someone who would only appear once every thousand years, and truly deserves to be ranked first in Piaomiao sect.

For the next few days, the Piaomiao members all took turns to lead Zhang Xiaohua, the result was that all four of them took their understanding of the Rohan fist to a “whole new world”. Everyone also took turns to “practice” their patience, but after seeing Zhang Xiaohua still stuck in the five and a half stances, He Tianshu waved his hands and let go of the last vestiges of hope in his heart, and the once fiery passion cooled back to its original dullness.

“I always wished for a biscuit to fall from heaven and straight into my mouth. Unfortunately, I guessed only the process correctly but not the result, and the thing that fell from the sky was a large metal weight and where it fell on was my

head.” For the next few days in Huanxi mountain villa, these were the words He Tianshu would say most often.

One may feel disappointed and frustration, but villa master Ou’s instructions still had to be followed to the letter.

Hence, He Tianshu changed his plan and began to teach Zhang Xiaohua the second set of fist martial arts, Sky Luo fist. The sky Luo fist was an extremely easy fist martial arts with only twenty stances, he would demonstrate it first and then made Zhang Xiaohua perform the same set of actions. Perhaps because of the foundation built up from practicing the Rohan fist, Zhang Xiaohua was able to execute up to the twelve stances on his first try which was like a drizzle in the drought-stricken field of He Tianshu’s heart. But then again, Zhang Xiaohua’s performance on the next day as like a tornado which blew the fields into an unrecognizable mess of mud.

The stances that Zhang Xiaohua remembered from the sky Luo fists were only three that were full of mistakes apart from the beginning posture, and these three stances were not even in the right sequence. Nobody knew how Zhang Xiaohua put these three stances together, and they actually looked like legitimate movements when performed.

In the end, it was naturally up to the other three disciples to take turns to teach Zhang Xiaohua. A few days later, the result was that Zhang Xiaohua was still performing the same three stances, his mistakes were not even corrected and remained exactly the same as before.

He Tianshu, no, the other three disciples as well, no longer even had the slightest hope for Zhang Xiaohua anymore.

He Tianshu decided to change his plan again, the four of them no longer taught Zhang Xiaohua the same martial arts movement. Instead, he let the other three disciples teach Zhang Xiaohua different types of martial arts and would not go over to instruct the latter personally anymore. After all, it did not matter who was teaching him because he would always make mistakes, and he could never remember the full set of motions. Thus, he did not bother to put in any effort in planning the curriculum and taught one stance after another.

When the other three disciples first taught Zhang Xiaohua, they would repeat

the same set of movements again and again, but they soon realized that no matter how many times they demonstrated be it once or twenty times, Zhang Xiaohua would only remember those few strokes on the second day and any further instruction would be fruitless. Hence, they changed the way they taught and would only demonstrate one different martial art once each day, no more and no less.

Hence, the Piaomiao sect disciples returned to their original lifestyles, only, they would take turns to teach Zhang Xiaohua a new martial art every evening no matter if it was simple or complex. In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua would then display whatever he could recall from his memory.

It was under this unusual way of training that Zhang Xiaohua learnt the incomplete Erlang fist, Skanda fist, Sage fist, Eight Immortals fist, Sky Luo fist, Ground Ghost fist, Six Star fist, Nezha fist, Adamantyl fist, Guanyin fist, Buddhist Han fist, Buddhism fist, Rohan fist, Adamantyl hammer, Twenty Eight Persistent fist, Four Sparring Immortals fist, Seven Stars Tour fist, Rohan Mantis fist, Yasha Ocean palm, Adamantyl Samadhi fist, Yasha Iron Sand hammer, et cetera. Learning a new martial art each day allowed him to accumulate a huge repertoire in a short period.

Among all these martial arts, the best he could remember was close to ten stances, and the worst was two to three stances, and among all these stances, very few went in the sequence in which they were supposed to. Most of them were put together somehow by Zhang Xiaohua, although strangely speaking, the way Zhang Xiaohua connected them was seamless like XX without any scar. Even He Tianshu was secretly amazed, and something even stranger was that none of these stances were exactly same as the original ones. As for the edited versions, Zhang Xiaohua would remember them deeply and no matter how many times he was corrected, it would go back to how it was again. Of course, for those that he could not remember, he would still not be able to recall them.

After the evening training, He Tianshu watched Zhang Xiaohua practiced the many incomplete martial arts he had gained over the past few days one after another which somehow combined to look quite consistent, and he shook his head thinking, "Being able to learn up to this standard, I guess he can still be considered a genius in his own right."

For the long period after then, Zhang Xiaohua would always be anxious for the morning and greedy for the night. He would be the first to arrive in the clearing, and would only return when it was closed to the darkest hour. His diligence was not missed by elder Yu who would watch him amid the darkness and nod to himself, thinking, “This Zhang Xiaohua’s aptitude is not just bad, his brain is as impenetrable as elm wood and it would not be unsuitable to carve a wood sculpture with it. However, his perseverance and willingness to rough it out is also equally abnormal, and he is worthy enough material to be molded from an iron rod to a needle.”

Little did anyone knew that whenever Zhang Xiaohua stepped into his room every night, he would hold breath and curse in his heart, when would this Ma Jing start to wash his leg? Likewise in the morning when he left his room, he would praise the heavens for the chance to breathe in fresh air again.

Sigh, heaven does have eyes. Could it be that every successful man will always have a person supporting him quietly from behind? Except that in Zhang Xiaohua’s case, the person at his back was Ma Jing with the smelly foot?

While Zhang Xiaohua was diligently training the martial arts that were taught to the four to five year old Piaomiao disciples, there was an atmosphere of joy and celebration on the Piaomiao mountain villa adjacent to Huanxi mountain villa.

Within Piaomiao sect discussion hall, there was a celebratory mood and no hint of any solemnity while Ou Peng himself was sitting at his usual high position smiling at the people below. Even though Ou Peng appeared to be composed and calm, the smile on his face was enough to let everyone know that their sect master was extremely happy that particular day.

But that was to be expected. Think about it, there were records of centuries of history from Piaomiao’s founding up till that day, and never once had Piaomiao sect’s power overtook Luoshui sect, and even in its heydays, the furthest it ever expanded was up to south of thousand swords peak. However, the successive generations of sect leaders had limited ability and the sect was forced to shrink its head back in like a tortoise. On that day, under the arrangement and leadership of Ou Peng, Shangguan Feng and the others, they managed to overcome the odds with a smaller group of followers while Ou Peng personally

captured Luoshui sect's sect master Shui Yupeng.

Luoshui sect was headquartered in Luoshui and they had the numerical advantage despite their forces being weaker than Piaomiao sect's men on average. The importance of the crack team of elite disciples would not be overlooked in their role to allow Piaomiao sect to successfully defeat Luoshui sect in one attempt. As for defeating the upper echelons of Luoshui sect, most of the reason for victory was naturally due to the Piaomiao's six tiger's superior martial arts.

As Ou Peng still had some lingering fear when he recalled the battle with the core powers of the Luoshi sect as he did not expect that Shui Yupeng would also be a hidden expert, and the few hallmasters and sect elders to be so strong as well. If not for the miraculous encounter a year ago, Piaomiao sect would have suffered a serious defeat and they might even be held captives right then within the Luoshui sect. Ou Peng could not help but warn himself again that power was might in the Jianghu world, and to go against a power stronger than oneself was akin to playing with fire.

Nevertheless, his current focus was on the celebration of their hard-earned victory, and anything else could be put on hold for later. Right then, morale was high in the entirety of Piaomiao mountain villa and everyone was celebrating, so Ou Peng could not bear to be the party-pooper. Even though he was usually strict, he would not be rigid to that extent.

The expressions of the people in the discussion hall were full of smiles no matter their seniority or age. In the beginning, some of the senior members were still being solemn, but they eventually let go when they saw their sect master's smile. It was a rare occasion and they would still have to face a solemn-faced sect master the next day, so they thought that they might as well enjoy the current moment.

Chapter 84: Brother-sister

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Brother-sister

Ou Peng felt a sense of contentment when he saw the lively atmosphere in the discussion hall. Was it not the duty of men to create a place of stability and peace for the people he cared about, it seemed that Ou Peng was close to achieving this goal.

Just as Ou Peng was being self-indulgent, he saw a beautiful figure walked into the discussion hall. Ou Peng's eyes brightened and a smile spread across his face, because the new arrival was none other than his beloved younger sister Ou Yan.

Ou Peng was no stranger to hardships; their parents had passed away early so he and his sister had to count on each other since young. When he was adopted by his master into the Piaomiao sect, his younger sister naturally followed him in. However, she did not learn martial arts, and instead stayed with Ou Peng's master's wife in Huanxi mountain villa. Ou Peng's master had no heirs so the Piaomiao sect sect-master's seat was passed on to Ou Peng after the former's careful consideration, whereas Huanxi mountain villa was passed down from Ou Peng's master's wife to Ou Yan directly, which meant that even if Ou Peng did not become Piaomiao's sect master, Huanxi mountain villa would still belong to Ou Yan eventually, and the latter did not inherit the mountain villa's ownership due to her connections with her elder brother.

Actually, following the longstanding relationship between Huanxi mountain villa and Piaomiao sect, many people felt that Ou Peng's wife was more suitable to manage the mountain villa, but they do not realize that many things are not what they seemed on the surface.

In the eyes of the Piaomiao six tigers, they remembered the little girl who

would follow Ou Peng from early on and have treated her as their own daughter or sister. Thus, they were not bothered by how outsiders would view them, and Huanxi villa was their backyard so they naturally had to pass it down to someone they are comfortable with. Even though the current sect master's wife was the beloved of the sect master, she was different from the previous sect master's wife because the latter was the founder of Huanxi mountain villa, whereas the former was an outsider no matter how virtuous or sensible she was. How could they be more comfortable with her when compared to Ou Yan whom the previous villa master had chosen personally as a successor?

While this was all true, Ou Yan was quite detached from the affairs of Piaomiao sect.

When Ou Peng saw his younger sister entered the discussion hall, his eyes showed a rare expression of warmth as he admired the way she walked slowly to his front as though he was looking at his own child. At this moment, Ou Peng was not just a man, he was like all other fathers under the heaven who felt proud of their beautiful daughters appearing in front of them.

Ou Yan also thought likewise, the elder brother in front of her was a fatherly figure. From as long as she could remember, her elder brother would accompany her, spoil her, love her, and left her feel the warmth of a parent. She guessed that the books which described fatherly love would be referring to the love she received from her elder brother. The only thing was that in Jianghu, where slaughter is common and life does not belong to oneself, Ou Yan would worry every time Ou Peng went out before he became sect master, and she would pray fervently to the heavens for the safety of this only remaining relative she had left. When Ou Peng became sect master, he would be preoccupied with the administration of sect affairs and would rarely set off personally. Ou Yan knew that her elder brother's work was hard, and she would try to use her own powers to assist him. Hence, she put in all her efforts into building up Huanxi mountain villa which would support Piaomiao sect in its logistics and medicinal needs when the latter was facing difficulties. Even during the matter of the treasure when the other parties required a hostage from a close relative, Ou Yan did not hesitate to volunteer herself because as long as she could help her brother, any price was not too high.

It was just that the matter Ou Peng wanted to accomplish this time was too appalling. He wanted to assimilate a sect that was comparable in size to his own, and even battle them on their own territory. Even though she knew that her elder brother had some fortuitous encounter and even consumed some martial arts aiding pill, Jianghu was not only about martial power. Luck and opportunity were also important factors, and furthermore, there were crouching tigers and hidden dragons all over Jianghu, and someone will always be standing above. Hence, Ou Yan was unable to sleep peaceful at night during the period when Ou Peng was away as constantly feared receiving any bad news about them.

When she received news of her elder brother's victory the day before, she wanted to be the first to welcome him back, but knowing that he was the sect master and not just her elder brother, she waited for the official celebration before going over to see him.

Ou Yan walked to the front of Ou Peng and curtsied, "Elder brother, congratulations on your large contribution to Piaomiao sect again."

Pu Peng saw his younger sister's gaunt, skinny face and felt pained, he said, "Yan'er, I have told you countless times not to worry about me. With my current abilities, there would be no problems escaping with my life if I encounter any danger. Look at what you have become after just a few days of not meeting each other, aren't you making it unbearable for me as well?"

Ou Yan smiled and said, "A pity your sister was not born a man or she could have taken your place in the battle. Else, what would there be for me to worry about now."

Ou Peng looked at his younger sister and he thought he saw his mother's features on her again. He had the sudden desire to rub her earlobes but the discussion hall was not his home, so he waved his hands and said, "The matters of the sect will naturally be done by elder brother, Yan'er do not to worry or be afraid. Even if you were a younger brother of mine, I would not let you put yourself in a dangerous situation to be the vanguard."

Ou Yan smiled as she said, "I already know this, you have always chosen to be the vanguard since young."

Ou Yan asked again, "How was the situation when you attacked Luoshui sect?"

Ou Peng pointed a chair and said, “Yan’er, sit first and I will recount it to you slowly.”

When Ou Yan was seated, Ou Peng recounted the details of when he first set off from Piaomiao sect and charged all the way to the core area of Luoshui sect and captured their sect master Shui Yupeng. In his narration, the difficult situations sounded simple and the dangerous situations were simply glazed over, but Ou Yan could pick them up and whenever it came to a surprise dangerous situation, she would break out into cold sweat even though her elder brother was sitting safe and sound right before her eyes then.

After Ou Peng had described the sequence of events, Ou Yan finally sighed in relief and said seriously to Ou Peng, “Elder brother, it really seemed dangerous this time, if elder brother and the other senior brothers had not improved their martial arts by a huge margin, this Luoshui sect would have been a dragon’s pond and tiger’s den.”

Ou Peng seemed to have many thoughts in his mind as he nodded and said, “Actually, if the few of us brothers did not experience a jump in our martial arts, we would not have the guts to swallow Luoshui sect. This unexpected increase in martial prowess may have led me to do things that I would not usually do.”

Ou Yan echoed his sentiments and said, “That is right, elder brother, the consequences or expectations after experiencing a surge in ones’ martial prowess would usually be out of the person’s control, because if you had not gotten used to having such power, you would not be too familiar with its consequences and could easily bring yourself to ruin.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “Yan’er is right, just like a farmer who suddenly became rich overnight, he would have other ambitions and do things that he would usually not dare to. Gambling, for example, if the farmer had not gone to a gambling house or had not dared to bet a huge amount before, after experience the surge of wealth, he would not hesitate as much to bet higher stakes. Even though he might win another fortune if he was lucky, he could lose everything if the banker was in control of him, and may even lose his own life as well. In that case, he would have lived a long and stable life had he not gotten rich overnight.”

Ou Yan smiled at her brother wordlessly while Ou Peng continued tenderly, “Yan’er, elder brother knows what is in your mind. Even though there were some dangers in attacking Luoshui sect this time, the reason was due to the sudden rise in our martial prowess. However, elder brother has learnt his lesson through this bloody experience, and would lead our fellow brothers more carefully in the future. You can rest at ease, elder brother won’t be a farmer who struck rich overnight.”

Ou Yan’s smile blossomed like a flower and she said gently, “I know that elder brother.”

Ou Peng asked again, “Yan’er, how are things in the mountain villa?”

Ou Yan wrinkled her brows and said, “Everything is the same as usual, there has been no advancement and the herbs do not sprout after they were planted, I wonder what the reason is.”

Ou Peng said with a slight bit of anxiety, “Could it be that our disciples do not know how to cultivate crops? Or the method of cultivation is wrong? If not, shall we get the pharmacy hall’s hallmaster Bai or elder He to send some disciples over?”

Ou Yan nodded and replied, “Perhaps we need to. The cultivation method follows the normal way we cultivate other herbs, and those disciples were also sent by pharmacy hall and they have rich experience in cultivating herbs, we just do not know why the herbs do not sprout. I guessed that the pharmacy hall did not have excess manpower to spare during the period you were preparing for the assault on Luoshui sect, but since hallmaster Ba and the rest should have some time on their hands now, it may be good for them to come over and take a look while I refer back to the old texts to look for any other ideas.”

Ou Peng nodded his head and said, “Yan’er, you have to take good care of your health, do not overextend yourself. While it would be good if the herbs can be cultivated, there is no problem if they don’t. Elder brother do not wish to see you hurt yourself for this insignificant herbs.”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “I know that elder brother. Even though I cannot cultivate deep and profound inner energy, I am still proficient in outer martial arts and my body is fit enough to not fall sick, so you don’t have to worry about

me.”

Ou Peng smiled back and said, “That’s right, if you had learnt the profound inner energy cultivation arts of Piaomiao sect, I would have to put you in the position of the sect master with your intelligence. Do you remember the expression on master’s face when he found out that you cannot train in that cultivation art, he was probably feeling upset that he had lost a good potential successor.”

Ou Yan scolded mockingly, “Elder brother, look at what you are saying. I have no interest in the position of the sect master, there are so many affairs like the number of hairs on a bull to settle each day, it would have driven me crazy from frustration. Staying in Huanxi mountain villa is much better, there is nothing troublesome throughout the year, and I can spend most of my time enjoying the view of the moon or flowers, while training some martial arts on the side, doesn’t that sound better?”

Ou Peng said enviously, “True, look at how well master and his wife treated you to give you the Huanxi mountain villa in its entirety. I also wish to live that kind of lifestyle, a pity...”

Ou Yan smiled and continued, “A pity that a person does not belong to himself when in Jianghu? That is not true, everyone has the power to control one’s life. Look at elder brother, you are like the moon that is surrounded by many little stars, and the power you hold is vast, aren’t there many people who are envious of your life as well?”

Chapter 85: Song

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Song

Ou Peng smiled proudly and said, “Yan’er is right. A man should proudly face the heavens and stand firmly on the earth, and they would naturally want to achieve something large in life. Farmers gain pride from the crops they grow, merchants are proud of their wealth and luxurious lifestyle, and people in the Jianghu would naturally want to spread their names afar in Jianghu. Since elder brother has ended up in the position of Piaomiao sect’s sect master, he would also wish to bring the sect to higher levels so that he and his fellow members can be proud as well. Perhaps when elder brother grows older, he would go over to your Huanxi mountain villa to retire.”

Ou Yan nodded her head in content and said, “Huanxi mountain villa will always open its doors for elder brother, and sister-in-law, and any of my future nephews and nieces, hehe, and even any grand nephews and nieces.”

As their conversation flowed up to this point, Ou Peng suddenly asked, “Yan’er, you are not so young anymore, do you need elder brother to arrange your marriage affairs for you?”

Ou Yan flushed and said, “Elder brother should concentrate on the sect’s affairs first. I will definitely tell elder brother if I find someone. Alright, let’s stop up to here, I shall go over and find big sister Qin.”

After finishing her sentence, she immediately stood up and walked to the row of hallmasters where a middle aged lady was seated among them.

Ou Peng could not help but laugh secretly when he saw his younger sister escape in zero quick time, he thought, “It seems that Yan’er has reached the appropriate age so I should start preparing. However, the number of eligible men

is not few at all, and I will have to look through each of them slowly.”

The elder sister Qin whom Ou Yan was speaking to was Piaomiao sect’s Mingcui hall hallmaster who was also widely known as big sister Qin. As the saying goes, ‘Jianghu’s children, long affection’. Since there were men in Jianghu, then there would naturally be women as well. Although a large portion of disciples recruited by the Piaomiao sect were boys, there were also some female disciples, and for the latter group, apart from a few who were personally disciples to an elder like Xue Qing, most of them were put to Mingcui hall. Of this group of heroines who can hold their own in Jianghu, most had extraordinary genetic factor which also manifested in their appearances, and thus, these heroines have beautiful faces that one would never tire to look at in general. However, big sister Qin was an exception, her looks were average which would not garner any notice and her skin was dark. From her appearances, she was no different from a middle aged woman in the village, or might not even matchup in appearance to some of them, and why is this so?

It is a well-known fact that people in Jianghu were all martial arts practitioners, and the reason they trained their martial arts was to protect their lives. They could of course do so by building their bodies, so having slim bodies was a natural thing among them. In fact,, if your body was not slim, you might even be ashamed to call yourself as a person from Jianghu. However, big sister Qin was the complete opposite, her waist was as thick as a water bucket and together with that face of hers, she really could not even compare in appearance to a village woman.

The most exasperating thing was that big sister Qin specialized in the snake fist, but for some unknown reason, perhaps because she wanted to train more in the areas she lacked or some other reason, she would avoid using it. Hence, most people would not have seen her displayed it before, and those who did were either dead immediately, or fainted in battle and died out of severe injuries later.

However, big sister Qin had one good point about her which was her voice. It was clear and crisp like an oriole, and no one would be tired even after hearing it a hundred times. When she sang, it could even shake the entire Jianghu. It was not known how many heroes in Jianghu would follow her voice to find the singer

before escaping immediately using their qinggong. The poem “Wanting to commit a crime when one’s eyes were closed, wanting to escape when one’s eyes were opened, closing one’s eyes again to protect one’s vision” was written by a person of renowned wit precisely for big sister Qin. However, big sister Qin had also made a significant contribution to the Jianghu world, because for a long period of time, the number of sex offenders in the Jianghu world decreased when these offenders realized that their ears could not be trusted. One of these most important martial arts in Jianghu was naturally qinggong, and big sister Qin had promoted its usefulness, to the point where several martial schools of qinggong wanted to find her to obtain her permission to use her in their recruitment.

However, before these schools could take any action, an accident happened which led big sister Qin to find her destined one. On that particular day when big sister Qin was singing loudly in the bath, our dear big brother Qin followed her voice and was so drunk in the song that when it ended, he found himself in an embarrassing situation. You could say that big brother Qin could have just turned around and escaped right? However, big brother Qin had looked down on qinggong since he was young as he felt that it was a mediocre martial art. At that critical moment, he realized his mistake. The other men who were hiding at a corner listening to the song immediately activated their qinggong and fled, but the pitiful big brother Qin was still caught by big sister Qin even after the latter got out of the bath and wore her clothes. When faced with her demonically powerful fist, he was forced to marry her and thus for a long time after the wedding, big brother Qin would pull the hands of everyone he saw and say, “I was stupid, I was foolish.” Then, he would straighten his back with great difficulty and say, “I only thought of qinggong was a martial art to escape, and was not something a real courageous man should learn, and that sex offenders who possess good qinggong used it for another reason. However, I did not realize that qinggong could be used to save lives, if your qinggong is bad, how can you continue to stay in Jianghu? I truly regret my actions, and if the heavens would give me another chance, I would apologize to my master and say that I was wrong, and behind my apology, I would also add that I would not dare to listen to other people’s singing in secret anymore.” Then, he would take a swig of deer blood tiger bone soup which he carried around his waist everywhere and

cry miserably.

After big sister Qin got married, she stopped roaming the Jianghu and stuck herself close to big brother Qin, while those martial schools who wanted to approach her dashed their ideas.

It was an accident how big sister Qin entered the Piaomiao sect, the couple was travelling in a remote, desolated area when they met an enemy and got injured, and it was unknown then if they could continue to survive. The six tigers of Piaomiao were passing by and brought them back to the sect to receive treatment, but unfortunately, big brother Qin's injuries were too severe and he passed away after a few days. Big sister Qin managed to keep her life and thus entered the Piaomiao sect and founded the Mingcui hall, with the name Mingcui coming from "Two yellow orioles cries (Ming) on a emerald (Cui) willow while a line of egrets flies in the sky", which suited well to big sister Qin.

When big sister Qin joined the Piaomiao sect, there were not few of the members then who had pursued her voice and escaped later, these people were also sympathetic of big brother Qin's accident as some of them were even among the people whose hands big brother Qing pulled. However, they were surprised when they saw their final exchange, and they would not forget big sister Qin holding on to big brother Qin's hands while saying, "Husband, I knew that you were inconvenienced when I forced you to marry me. Following me has truly caused much trouble for you, I have let you down."

Big brother Qin shook his head weakly and used the last of his strength to grab onto big sister Qin's hands, he said, "No, you are wrong, meeting you was my greatest fortune. The saying goes that when the light is extinguished, all women are the same. However, it is wrong because when the lights are extinguished, you are the best of them. With such a wife, what more can the husband ask for? Can you sing one final song for me?"

Hence, big sister Qin forced her greatly weakened body, and opened her chapped lips to sing, "A plum blossom branch in the middle of the snow....." In the middle of her song, big brother Qin closed his eyes and big sister Qin tears started to cover her face. However, what made everyone surprised was that big brother Qin opened his eyes with difficulty after the song ended and said, "One more thing, the deer blood tiger bone soup you made was really good."

Big sister Qin understood his final intention and forced a smile to say, "You are good, I am also good."

After then, big brother Qin's grip relaxed and he passed away.

Big sister Qin also fainted from her pain and only woke up after a full day. Then, she forced her battered body up to conduct the final rites for big brother Qin, and made a pledge in front of all the witnesses to never remarry and never sing again.

When this story spread around, everyone lamented, "With thick feelings, the plum blossom withers."

Thus, big sister Qin earned the respect of the entire Piaomiao sect.

Ou Yan was naturally won over, and she liked this hallmaster who was also a woman like her. Whenever they were free, she would seek the latter out to chat, not to mention that big sister Qin's voice was so beautiful to listen to.

However on that day, when Ou Yan has not spoken more than a few sentences to big sister Qin, she saw Zhang Chengyue walked over to Ou Peng's front and whispered something. Ou Peng nodded his head, stood up and signaled to first elder Hu and second elder Li of the six Piaomiao tigers, and the three men headed out of the discussion hall together.

After the three men left, they walked along the corridor to the back of the discussion hall and passed by a long row of houses before entering through a door. The door was an entrance to a large and spacious courtyard and there was a large hall on the other side of the courtyard with the words written on its door plaque "Rule Enforcement hall". It was the rule enforcement hall of Piaomiao sect, and there was powerful looking old man with a solemn face waiting inside, who was precisely the rule enforcement hall hallmaster Liu Yuzhou.

Upon seeing the new arrivals, Liu Yuzhou walked forward and greeted, "Greetings to the sect master."

Ou Peng hurriedly returned the greeting, "Hallmaster Liu, please dispense with the ceremony. Has Shui Yupeng been brought inside?"

Hallmaster Liu cautiously replied, "Yes, sect master, the escort took painful cares to ensure his arrival so it took a little while longer. There were also family

members of Shui Yupeng whom we brought along, and as sect master have instructed, we treated them well and nobody was harmed.”

Ou Peng nodded his head in satisfaction and said, “It has been hard on old hallmaster Liu, but I can only rest easy if this matter was handled personally by you.”

Hallmaster Liu smiled and replied, “Sect master is too kind, this is the job of this old man.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “Old hallmaster Liu does not have to be so courteous, you have been the rule enforcement hall hallmaster for longer than I have been the sect master, your cautiousness in handling this matter is of great benefit to the sect. Alright, let’s go in to see this Luoshui sect’s sect master to see what we can gain from him.”

After finishing his sentence, he led the way in while the rest followed behind his tail.

The main hall of the rule enforcement sect was very large but there were not many chairs or windows. There was not much light coming from outside so the interior was dark and gloomy. Most of the disciples from this hall had gone to the discussion hall and the fields to join the celebrations, so only a few elite disciples were left standing guard inside.

These people bore blades in their hands as they guarded the area fiercely, not daring to allow any mistake because within this hall was the recently captured Luoshui sect’ sect master Shui Yupeng.

Chapter 86: Going down

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Going down

Within the rule enforcement hall was a man in white, with his hands behind his back, standing beside a pillar and looking absorbed in the patterns carved on it. There were some tears and bloodstains on his white robes, but it did not diminish the aura of his straight nose bridge and long sharp eyebrows, making the people who saw him feel that his strong sense of character.

Ou Peng walked into the rule enforcement hall and turned his gaze onto this person, while the latter also turned back upon hearing the footsteps. Their eyes met, and Ou Peng stopped his footsteps while the other party remained completely still. Both men winced before retracting their gaze, and the white robed man returned his attention towards the patterns on the wall, while Ou Peng continued to walk until he reached the seat that was facing the entire hall.

Ou Peng sat on the chair and looked quietly at the tall white robed man while appearing to be deep in thought. The white robed man did not meet his gaze directly and the atmosphere froze with was an air of suspense.

When the Piaomiao six tigers walked into the rule enforcement hall, only first elder Hu Yunyi sat beside Ou Peng, the rest stood at a side and Liu Yuzhou followed suit. After a short moment, some people began to lose patience and fifth elder Liu Qingyang opened his mouth to speak, "Hey this man, you have already been captured by our Piaomiao sect, why bother putting up such an appearance? Do you believe that this fifth elder will let you taste my axe again?"

Ou Peng was slightly irritated and he threw an angry glance at fifth elder Liu, saying "Fifth younger brother, don't say anything unnecessary."

Fifth elder Liu was indignant and he said, "Third brother, this... ..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the white robed man spoke out, "Since I am now your prisoner, my life or death is in your hands, what more can I say?"

Ou Peng smiled and said, "Brother Shui does not have to bother speaking with him, my fifth brother is a boorish man, so you do not have to take his words to heart."

The white robed Shui Yupeng snorted and did not say anything else.

At that moment, fourth elder Shangguan said, "Sect master Shui, do you still think that we are at Luoshui sect? Since you know that you are our prisoner, you should behave like one instead of making others feel like they are beneath you. You act as if we were lucky in defeating you, but you should be feeling fortunate that we have not crippled your martial arts."

Shui Yupeng threw a glance towards fourth elder Shangguan but remained silent still.

Fourth elder Shangguan continued, "I know that sect master Shui must be thinking that our Piaomiao sect had the advantage of a sneak attack and Luoshui sect suffered a defeat because of the lack of preparation. If this is what is in your mind, then you probably think that the loser should have been us."

Shui Yupeng snorted again and said in a clear voice, "Small tricks, can't even reach the palace hall."

Fourth elder Shangguan snorted as well and said sharply, "What small tricks, what despicable methods, what overt conspiracy, a plan that brings victory is a good plan. There is no use for reason in Jianghu, there is no need to be upright and moral, sect master Shui has been too stable in his position and have forgotten that weak is food for the strong rule in Jianghu."

Shui Yupeng said, "As said by the person who planned it out, I naturally can guess so."

Fourth elder Shangguan continued, "Whoever knows this principle would also know that when one swallows others to increase his own power, then there would also come a day when he gets swallowed by someone else. Whatever you do know will be paid back to you in kind in the future, I am sure sect master Shui would not forget how the Luoshui sect came to where it is now right."

At that moment, Shui Yupeng's eyes became slightly unsteady and the confidence he had before was shaken momentarily.

Seeing the scene before him, first elder Hu spoke up, "Sect master Shui is still regretting the attack you made on Xinrong sect? You think if we had not intervened, your attack would have been successful?"

Shui Yupeng's face turned darker and he said, "You are right, our Luoshui sect had always survived by living near the water, we have no businesses on the plains. In order for us to expand, I did everything I could and planned for several years to bring Xinrong sect under our thumb, but never would have expected that you would take advantage of the opportunity when our attention was on Xinrong to attack, if not, how could we have fallen into your hands so easily?"

Fourth elder Shagguan smiled and said, "As our forefathers have said, people who plan must plan for all circumstances, surely sect master Shui has learnt something this simple before. Furthermore, occasions when the oriole stalks the mantis who preys on the cicada has happened many times over the history of Jianghu, so you can only blame your own careless having fallen into our sneak attack. Just because you can plan to expand inland, can't the people on land plan to expand into the water?"

Shui Yupeng looked upwards and lamented, "Man proposes and heaven disposes. Since the heavens wish me dead, what else can I do?"

At that moment, Ou Peng cut into the conversation with a teasing voice, "Sect master Shui, your words are not right. This is not heavens wishing you dead but opening their eyes to help you instead."

Shui Yupeng was surprised and he asked strangely, "What is the meaning of your words? Are you saying that you are doing us a favor by swallowing our sect?"

After he said his sentence, Shui Yupeng laughed hollowly.

Ou Peng did not turn angry when saw the other party's response, instead, he asked, "Does sect master Shui not know of the background of the Xinrong sect's head, Zhao Xin?"

"Zhao Xin?" Shui Yu Peng said in disdain when he heard the name, "Isn't he

some common mountain bandit who obtained the support of a wealthy merchant in Yu city and managed to survive in the cracks among the other major sects? What kind of background would he have?”

“Then what about Zhen Rong?” Ou Peng continued to ask.

“Zhen Rong?” Shui Yupeng was puzzled as he said, “Isn’t he the second-in-command for Zhao Xin? Who was a scholar whom Zhao Xin had robbed in the mountains? I have heard that the two men would fight whenever they first met, but later acknowledged each other as equals and became sworn brothers, and thus, Zhan Rong became an outlaw as well.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “What sect master Shui has said is right, and this Zhen Rong later felt that robbing in the mountains was not a proper way to live so he threaded the needle and connected Xin Rong with the wealthy merchant in Yu city. Then, they went down the mountains and established Xinrong sect between Yu city and Pingyang city.”

Shui Yupeng nodded as he listened.

Ou Peng then asked again, “Has sect master Shui ever wondered why that wealthy merchant would want to cooperate with a nameless mountain bandit?”

Shui Yupeng pondered for a moment and said, “According to my sect’s intelligence, that wealthy merchant wanted to expand his own influence and was looking for an opportunity to make a name for himself instead of just dabbling in commerce.”

Ou Peng continued to ask, “Then, why did this wealthy merchant not approach a larger sect from Yu city, or our Piaomiao sect who is from Pingyang city?”

Shui Yupeng replied, “Perhaps he thought that Xinrong was easier to control? If he had to work with a larger sect like yours, he would have to give up a larger share of the pie.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “There is some reason in what you say. In that case, sect master Shui, why do you think Piaomiao sect chose not to attack Xinrong sect which is so close to us and instead targeted your Luoshui sect instead?”

Shui Yupeng laughed and said, “Why would I know? Perhaps you see Xinrong sect as a large fly with too little meat on its bones.”

Ou Peng replied otherwise, “You are wrong, sect master Shui. Xinrong sect is between Pingyang city and Yu city, so if our sect were to assimilate them into our own, our influence would expand and reach even closer to Yu city, so the potential benefits it brings is not little at all.”

Shui Yupeng also found it strange and asked in return, “So why has sect master Ou not made any moves?”

Ou Peng smiled mysteriously and replied, “That is because of Zhan Rong.”

“Zhan Rong?” Shui Yupeng was stunned.

Ou Peng continued to explain, “Zhan Rong is a disciple who was abandoned by Dalin temple’s disciplinary elder Chang Gung.”

Shui Yupeng sucked in a breath of cold air when he heard the other party’s words. He was a sect master himself and did not lack in foresight or deduction skills, he only lacked information which led to two vastly different decisions between the two men who were also sect masters.

Neither were stupid people, Shui Yupeng immediately understood the implications with Ou Peng’s pointer.

He had almost rubbed the butt of a tiger.

The word “abandoned” could lead to many different interpretations. Firstly, as the saying goes, one must look at who is the owner before beating a dog, even though the disciple was already abandoned by his master, he was still a person of Dalin temple. Even if Dalin temple did not want such a person in their sect, they would not ignore his actions or events that occurred to him. If you disciplined this abandoned disciple, then won’t you be spurning Dalin temple indirectly? Furthermore, even if Dalin temple had truly let go of this person, the whole sect would not stop the disciplinary elder from settling a personal vendetta with his affection towards his disciples as a cause. Was this disciplinary elder, elder Chang Gung someone that could afford to anger? Not to mention the master himself, even a disciple of the former would be able to destroy the whole Luoshui sect.

In addition, there is always a chance of “return” when something is “abandoned”. Who knows if Dalin temple had let go of this disciple in a moment

of anger and was already planning to accept him back into the sect? This was a possibility that cannot be casually ignored. Furthermore, Dalin temple did not proclaim to the Jianghu that they had let him go, and Ou Peng had only obtained this information through secretive means, so what if Dalin temple announced one day that this “abandoned” disciple was not really expelled, then wouldn’t all the people who had harmed or had underhand motives towards Xinrong sect be enemies of the Dalin temple?

Sigh, this word “abandoned” was used very cleverly by Dalin temple.

As Shui Yupeng thought of all these, his heart turned cold and his face turned pale.

However, he maintained his cold demeanor as he said, “Even if our Luoshui sect fails to take over the Xinrong sect and are swallowed over instead, or if we had angered Dalin temple, how does this differs from our current situation? The great sect master Ou, you have only shortened the steps from a hundred to fifty, and since you have become the victor, then naturally you have the bragging rights to laugh at me.”

Ou Peng smiled but he did not refute the other party’s words. Instead, he glanced at Li Jian who got the signal and nodded before walking forward to Shui Yupeng’s front. Without saying anything else, he unsheathed the precious sword from his waist, circulated his qi and slashed it down. Shui Yupeng thought that he had finally met his end and closed his eyes in a dignified manner. However, after waiting for a long while, the pain did not come so he opened his eyes and looked strangely at Ou Peng.

Ou Peng continued to smile at him like before wordlessly.

Shui Yupeng looked at Li Jian confusedly and he was shocked to a daze by the scene in front of him.

“This... this is sword light?” Shui Yu Peng’s face was ashen like death as he looked at the extended long sword which giving off light, and he exclaimed in shock, “There is such a sword technique in this world?”

After a moment later, he took a deep breath and said, “Master Li’s martial arts have reached such an extent, I have lost completely. I have nothing to say left.”

Then, he turned to Ou Peng and said, “I thought that I was unlucky to have suffered sect master Ou’s sneak attack, and thus felt indignant. I was unable to focus when fighting with sect master Ou because of the circumstances, and thought that it was the reason for my loss. However, I can see now that master Ou is more than what he appears to be.”

Chapter 87: Surrender

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Surrender

Ou Peng said, "Sect master Shui must be joking, blades have no eyes so how can one hold back in a life or death situation? I had used my entire martial prowess in our battle, and it is natural for my second senior brother to have more profound martial arts than me. I have always busied myself with affairs of the sect, and my martial arts have slugged as a result. Martial art is like a boat on water, if one does row forward continuously, he will be left behind. I believe brother Shui would understand my predicament as well.

After he finished his speech, he waved his hands towards Li Jian who understood and kept back his sword and returned to his position.

Shui Yupeng sniffed silently without answering; he thought, "Only a fool would believe your words."

However, Shui Yupeng no longer had a proud expression on his face anymore. Even though Piaomiao sect had taken advantage of Luoshui sect when they were unaware and scooped them all into a net in one swoop, they were backed by their abilities despite not displaying it during then. Just from Li Jian's martial art, he could tell that Luoshui sect had no one on par with the man, and if the two sects were to collide head on, the results would still be the same.

Shui Yupeng had already lost all hope in that moment.

Ou Peng saw the color on Shui Yupeng's face and smiled, he said, "Sect master Shui, I have a present which I hope you will kindly accept."

After finishing his sentence, he nodded towards fourth elder Shangguan who immediately rushed out of the rule enforcement hall. Shui Yupeng looked strangely at Ou Peng while his heart felt a trace of unsettledness.

Indeed, not long after, fourth elder Shangguan returned to the rule enforcement hall followed by a lady who was dressed elaborately while carrying a vigorous child around three years old. The lady's complexion was pale and her mentality was slightly agitated whereas the little boy was roving his eyes around in curiosity while sucking deliciously on a candied fruit in his hands.

The two new arrivals followed behind Shangguan Fengliu as they entered through the entrance, and when Shui Yupeng saw these two familiar figures, he immediately shook with irrepressible anger and turned around to lock his gaze towards Ou Peng. He yelled fiercely, "Ou Peng, you..."

Even before Shui Yupeng could finish his sentence, Ou Peng laughed and interrupted, "Sect master Shui, what are you going to say about me?"

Shui Yupeng lowered his voice by several tones and said, "Jianghu people have our own set of rules, my martial art is below yours so you can do whatever you want with my life. However, my wife does not know any martial art so why have you brought them here?"

Towards the end of his sentence, his voice was injected with a tone of pleading.

Ou Peng maintained his smiling expression as he waved his hands and said, "Brother Shui words are too heavy, I am not like what you think."

While the two people were conversing, the woman and child had already entered the rule enforcement hall, and the boy was looking curiously at the group of strangers. When his gaze passed a familiar face, he yelped in happiness and ignored the candied fruit in his hands, throwing it back into his mother's bosom. The woman continued to hold him tightly not daring to let go, and her eyes looked helplessly at Shui Yupeng. The child's face turned red as his little body struggled to break free of his mother's embrace and his hands stretched out towards Shui Yupeng. Right at that moment, Shui Yupeng no longer bothered about the Jianghu, or about any bloodshed, or about the dominance of whatever era, or standing at the apex of Jianghu, all he could think of was the warm feeling of holding on to his son, and using his facial hair to brush against his soft and smooth face, and to see his tender smile when he was within his embrace.

The Shui Yupeng of that moment no longer had any reservations of pride left, he bent his straight waist and extended his hands that were kept at his back to give his son a motion of hugging him, and when the lady saw his actions, she released her grip and carefully placed the child on the floor. The moment the boy's foot landed on the ground, he immediately giggled and ran over towards Shui Yupeng with the candied fruit still in his hands. When the boy was close enough, Shui Yupeng used his two hands to grab under the boy's arms and carried him up to above his head level, shaking him left and right until the child laughed his fill before hugging him tighter into his embrace. He stroked the boy's head and squinted his eyes lovingly to enjoy this moment that will not last for long.

The child seemed to be uncomfortable being hugged so tightly by his father and he struggled while poking his face out of Shui Yupeng's embrace, then he exerted his strength to thrust the candied fruit in his hands towards his father's mouth, before saying in an immature voice, "Father, this is for you. It is really sweet."

Shui Yupeng replied warmly, "Good boy Tiantian, father doesn't want it, you can eat it yourself."

The boy did not seem happy and he wriggled his body cutely to say, "Father has to eat it. Tiantian has been saving it for father. If father doesn't eat, Tiantian will finish it. At that time, Tiantian won't be happy anymore."

If it was a normal day, Shui Yupeng would not have eaten the candied fruit and would try to find ways to let the child finish it himself. But at that moment, his eyes turned wet as he looked at the earnest gaze in his child's eyes and opened his mouth. Seeing that his father finally agreed, the boy became happy again and put the candied fruit into his father's mouth. On seeing Shui Yupeng bit down on one of the fruits, he smiled sweetly and carefully ate another red candied fruit which was as large as his own mouth happily.

As he ate the fruit, he blabbered, "Elder sister Xue was right, she did not lie to Tiantian. I can really see father here."

Shui Yupeng was surprised and asked, "Who is elder sister Xue?"

Tiantian replied as he ate, "She is the pretty elder sister who puts on

something on her face. Elder sister Xue took Tiantian and mother away, she said that we are coming to find father, and even gave Tiantian this yummy thing to eat. It has been many days already, Tiantian thought that elder sister was lying.”

Shui Yupeng immediately understood the situation.

He then hugged Tiantian and walked to the lady’s side. He said, “Tiantian be a good boy, go play with mother. Father has some more things to do, and will come back to play with you later.”

Upon listening, Tiantian stretched his hands and hugged Shui Yupeng’s neck, wrinkled his small eyebrows and said unhappily, “Then father has to come quick. Don’t be the same as in the past, always not keeping your words.”

Shui Yupeng smiled and kissed Tiantian’s face, he said, “Father will keep his words this time.”

Tiantian gave a small whoop, blobbered a kiss on Shui Yupeng’s face and said, “Then Tiantian will be waiting for father outside.” He then obediently retracted his hands and turned towards his mother who carefully took him over.

The lady’s face has returned some of its color by then, and Shui Yupeng looked at her with complex emotions in his face before nodding his head. The lady’s eyes had expressions of joy and surprise; she did not say anything to Shui Yupeng and turned to walk out of the hall while Tiantian who was in her embrace looked back reluctantly towards him.

When the figures of these two people disappeared, Shui Yupeng turned to face Ou Peng and said, “Sect master Ou...”

Ou Peng understood his intentions and said, “Sect master Shui can be at ease, the fourteen members of your family are unharmed.”

Ou Peng turned towards the other people and said, “Bring a chair over for sect master Shui.”

The people took a chair and brought it over to Shui Yupeng’s side, and Ou Peng said, “Sect master Shui, please take a seat before we talk.”

Shui Yupeng looked at the seat and pondered, he took a death breath and slowly sat down.

Upon seeing his actions, Ou Peng smiled in satisfaction.

He continued, “Since brother Shui has sat down, please listen calmly as I continue our topic from before. From brother Shui’s perspective, there is no difference for Luoshui sect being taken over by my Piaomiao sect or Dalin temple. However, if brother Shui would think more carefully, you would notice the difference between these two scenarios. If Luoshui sect was conquered by Dalin temple or Xinrong sect, it would be due to your attack on Xinrong sect failing or Dalin temple taking revenge for Xinrong sect. Given the difference in power between Luoshui sect and Xinrong sect, the latter is more likely to happen, and by that time, Dalin temple would not be as merciful when they take their revenge, and every member of your sect would face annihilation, not to mention your family. Furthermore, Dalin sect had always been powerful in water warfare, so they would not let Luoshui sect off easily, and the only conclusion would be the destruction of Luoshui sect.”

Shui Yupeng smiled sadly and said, “I have gotten too ahead of myself. If I really went ahead with my assault, it would be akin to smashing an egg on a rock and the result would probably as you described.”

Ou Peng continued, “But now that the situation has changed, brother Shui has not launched any attack on Xinrong sect before you were captured by our Piaomiao sect, so the knot between you and Dalin temple has not been tied yet.”

Shui Yupeng smiled coldly and said, “But our Luoshui sect has fallen under you, so isn’t the result the same? The only difference is in the casualty number, unless you are willing to let me continue leading the Luoshui sect?”

When he said up to here, he became surprised and raised his head to face Ou Peng, “Could it be that sect master Ou has this intention?”

When Piaomiao sect began their attack on Luoshui sect, he had already arranged his family’s escape before leading the sect elders and hallmaster to battle. When they suffered a complete loss and were captured by the masses, Shui Yupeng had already given up on hope and expected that the Luoshui sect could not escape its extermination that day. From that day on, Luoshui sect would cease to exist and he would be killed off. When he was brought to Piaomiao sect, it was most probably to parade his execution to create a larger

impact of their victory.

Hence, Shui Yupeng tried to defend the last of his dignity to leave a good name before he departed from this world.

Actually, Shui Yupeng had never considered the scenario where Piaomiao sect would let him stay alive and use him to enable their sect to advance through the waters. When he thought about it, even though Piaomiao sect did not have any influence over the waters, the Luoshui sect had so many elders and hallmasters and they could have simply picked one. Even though the replacement would not have the same prestige he had in his sect, there was no shortage of useable people in the sect, and with the aid of Piaomiao sect's assistance, Luoshui sect could still advance without him, whereas if he was kept alive, he would be a hidden danger to them from inside Luoshui sect.

Thus, Shui Yupeng always thought that Piaomiao sect would never let him off.

However, Ou Peng had compared the difference in powers of the two sects, shared information on the background of Xinrong sect, and even hinted the superiority of Piaomiao sect's martial arts, before bringing out his family. After going through this entire act, could it be....

Shui Yupeng's heart lightened slightly, but he still did not dare to believe that Ou Peng would be bold as to keep him alive to lead Luoshui sect again.

Chapter 88: Solution

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

NOTE : As you may have noticed that there has been no LOTCG chapters for the past few days. The reason is that translator is busy with his work. So the translations will be slow until June 17th. However, he might be dropping chapters here n then. Sry for the inconvenience...

Solution

After listening to Shui Yupeng's words, Ou Peng smiled loftily and replied, "And why would that not be possible?"

When the other part has taken such a large step back, how could Shui Yupeng not understand what he needed to do? He immediately bowed down and called, "Shui Yupeng greets sect master Ou."

Ou Peng waited for the other party to bow before he supported him to get up. He said, "Brother Shui is too courteous. Since you are now part of Piaomiao sect, you are also our brother so quickly get up."

The rest of the people saw the situation and they smiled happily as they walked forward to congratulate the newcomer.

Hence, Shui Yupeng greeted each of them again one by one.

After everyone returned the greetings, Ou Peng made everyone move more chairs over and everyone sat down together.

Ou Peng smiled as he said to Shui Yupeng, "Brother Shui is probably wondering why I chose you instead of someone else lead Luoshui."

Shui Yupeng cupped his fists and said, "Since sect master has made this arrangement, he would naturally have his own reasons, and your subordinate will follow whatever instructions he receive. However, I do feel strange because

there are many people in Luoshui sect down the hierarchy who can replace my position, to choose me over them was really out of my expectations. If sect master could aid this subordinate to understand his reasons, I will listen to them carefully.”

Ou Peng smiled when he heard Shui Yupeng calling himself “subordinate”, and he said, “Brother Shui does not have to call himself my subordinate, our Piaomiao sect is not so stiff and I do not see brother Shui as one. If you do not mind, brother Shui can just address me as his brother.”

Shui Yupeng readily accepted his new sect master’s advice and smiled, “Since sect master have said so, how would this brother dare to do otherwise?”

Ou Peng continued, “Even though the battle between Luoshui sect and Piaomiao sect was very intense, our Piaomiao sect had only dispatched our elite disciples and we did not go too far in dealing with our opponents. And even though Luoshui sect was captured, the number of injuries and deaths was minimized to almost none, and only their hearts suffered a serious setback. What the Piaomiao sect wants to do now is to rebuild the morale of your Luoshui members to deter the prying intentions of other sects, and the consolidate Luoshui’s power as quick as possible again. If the person they rally under is not brother Shui, then not only do they have to rewash the whole sect’s hierarchy, suspicion may grow among the members. Although Piaomiao sect can use our strength to force things to the way we want, it would not be as good as brother Shui leading the sect himself. Our Piaomiao sect has nobody who is adept in water warfare so all the matters will still be handled by Luoshui sect members, and the best person to supervise them is none other than brother Shui. If not, I would not have put in so much effort to buy your allegiance to our Piaomiao sect.”

Shui Yupeng was not completely convinced and he asked, “Could sect master be assured if this brother returns to Luoshui alone?”

“Haha,” Ou Peng broke into laughter and said, “Brother Shui, suspicious people cannot be used, but one cannot be suspicious towards the people he use. I cannot afford to be suspicious of you if I am entrusting Luoshui to you. However, it is safer for me to have some insurance, so brother Shui’s family need not return with you. Our Piaomiao sect has appropriate residences and is also

not too far from Luoshui so brother Shui can return here often in the future. Moreover, I can see that nephew Tiantian possesses good bone and tendons so he might be talented in martial arts in the future. Hence, after this year, I will let Chengyue or Ah-Hai to accept him as their disciple so he can learn our Piaomiao martial arts and in the future, he will be the bridge between our two martial factions.”

Shui Yupeng’s face shifted slightly as he cupped his fist and said, “Many thanks to sect master for arranging so.”

Ou Peng caught the change in expression of the other party and he smiled, “Brother Shui seemed to have misunderstood my intentions, but that is not unexpected. Since I have invited brother Shui to join our Piaomiao sect, I would naturally have to share some benefits with you. Otherwise, how will you be willing to stick through this?”

Upon seeing Shui Yupeng’s doubtful expression, Ou Peng laughed heartily and said, “Brother Shui, there are as many sects in Jianghu as trees in a forest, and each sect would have their periods of growth and decline. New sects will sprout and old sects will wither away as a new generation takes the place of the old. For example, Luoshui sect was not established before two generations or around thirty years ago right.”

Shui Yupeng nodded in agreement and said, “Yes, it has not been more than thirty years. Sects like Luoshui sect are spread across Jianghu, and their numbers are uncountable.”

Ou Peng continued to explain, “Most sects in Jianghu would stay in the wind for only a few hundred years, but there are also some sects who are like cornerstones which are rooted deeply and not affected by the winds of Jianghu. I believe brother Shui is no stranger to them.”

Shui Yupeng smiled and said, “That is of course, those sects like Dalin temple, Chuanxiang church are the giant sects whose histories are counted in the centuries, who would not have heard of them?”

Ou Peng nodded his head and continued, “These giant sects have their own fixed mountains and the few tens of li of area around it would be reserved for their own disciples to live and learn martial arts. The most critical thing is that

these core sects have their own martial arts heritage, and all their disciples would learn their own type of martial arts which are superior to ours, and can provide twice the result with half the effort. Furthermore, these core sects would have their own means and ways of choosing disciples to sift out the extraordinary talents from the ordinary population to ensure their own prosperity.”

Shui Yupeng smiled bitterly and said, “Sect master is right, just like how Dalin temple has the Buddha’s Palm and Nianhua heart method which are all household names among the people in Jianghu. The Rohan fist, Erlang fist and other similar martial arts are all lower-tiered martial arts that disciples from Dalin temple would disdain, and Dalin temple’s inner energy cultivation methods are so exclusive that even rumors of them are rare. Our Luoshui sect does not have our own inner energy cultivation method, and I was only lucky in my youth to receive part of an inheritance of an inner energy cultivation method to be able to reach my current achievements in Jianghu. If not, I do not know where I would be, holding a sword and shedding blood to exchange for more days to live.”

Ou Peng said, “That is right, brother Shui’s sentiments echoes most others in Jianghu. Entering Jianghu is easy but learning martial arts is hard. It is almost impossible to achieve a profound level in martial arts without a fortunate encounter or deep resources from one’s sect.”

Shui Yupeng was still puzzled, even though the matters they discussed were Jianghu secrets which the general populace would not know, it was common knowledge about the various sect masters and faction heads, and he did not know why Ou Peng was discussing them with him now.

Shui Yupeng wrinkled his brows but he continued to talk, “Indeed, when I thought back to past, I had left home at the age of ten with the ambition of roaming the Jianghu world. However, my eyes were blindfolded, and I was led by someone to throw my life for a small sect, and after years of fighting and killing, I finally learnt that it were the giant sects like Dalin temple and Chuanxiao church that were the sacred places for martial arts. By the time I found an opportunity to go over there to find a master, I was rejected because of my age. Even though I picked up some skills through countless of life and death battles, I was still trash that could not even be put into consideration in those people’s eyes. In

retrospect, I was too rash and my thoughts were still immature to have wished to obtain some profound martial art or... ..”

After speaking to this point, Shui Yupeng shook his head as though he wanted to forget about the past.

Ou Peng could empathize and he said, “Brother Shui is right, Jianghu has always been such that the master picks his disciples and never the other way round. In general, disciples will be picked from a large group of youths where their bones and tendons will be strengthened and their meridians widened. If one was not chosen then, he would not be able to amount to anything even if he had the right qualifications because his meridians would have already set. Even our Piaomiao sect would not accept such disciples, not to mention Dalin temple and Chuanxiang church. Even among the disciples who entered the sect, we would have to check their aptitudes, and some would learn external martial arts and the others would learn internal martial arts, and each person would have their different paths with different results. If the sect you chose did not have a suitable martial art for you, your ten years of hard work would only amount to another person’s training for a year, so how can you build a name for yourself? Thus, the heritage of martial arts of a sect is of paramount importance.”

Shui Yupeng felt dejected as he said, “What sect master says is precisely what is happening. I am envious of those disciples who managed to enter Dalin temple and Chuanxiang church, they are truly fortunate to be able to learn such profound, original martial arts.”

At that moment, first elder Hu who was listening at a side smiled and spoke up, “Sect master Shui, you do not have to be envious anymore, because a good opportunity is right in front of you.”

Shui Yupeng was stunned, he asked, “Elder brother Hu, what do you mean?”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “Calm down brother Shui, while talking about martial arts heritage, brother Shui’s mind has naturally tend towards the giant sects with centuries of history. Actually, there are some martial arts heritages from other weaker sects that managed to survive under the winds of the Jianghu, only that most people are incompetent or unsuitable and thus cannot match up against the giant sect’s disciples. Hence, training in these sects will not be too

worse off compared to training in those giant sects like Dalin temple.”

Upon hearing these words, Shui Yupeng’s face frozen before it turned into an expression of joy. He stood up excitedly from his chair and asked, “Sect master, would the Piaomiao sect happen to have one of these martial arts heritages?”

After speaking his question, he looked at Ou Peng’s face in disbelief.

Ou Peng smiled and nodded.

Shui Yupeng sighed out and said, “Luoshui sect is like an infant compared to the Piaomiao sect, to be able to cast our lot with the Piaomiao sect would be my and our Luoshui sect’s fortune. It’s a pity that my meridians have already settled and I cannot switch to the Piaomiao martial arts, it is truly regretful.”

Ou Peng said comfortingly, “Brother Shui do not need to despair, haven’t I offered nephew Tiantian to join our Piaomiao sect? Giving your son the opportunity to work towards a goal which you cannot attain, isn’t it a form of happiness as well?”

Shui Yupeng felt deep gratitude and he bowed once again, saying, “Many thanks to sect master’s arrangement.”

However, his words were truly from his heart this time.

Ou Peng hurriedly got up and supported Shui Yupeng to stand, he said, “Since we are brothers now, there is no need to be so courteous.”

After he finished his sentence, he sent a wave of inner energy and slapped onto Shui Yupeng’s shoulders. A deep and thick inner energy flowed from the latter’s shoulders into the Shui Yupeng’s meridians, unsealing the sealed acupuncture points as it moved across his body because Ou Peng was certain then of Shui Yupeng’s allegiance.

Shui Yupeng could feel the profoundness of Ou Peng’s inner energy and he could not help but feel surprised. There were many techniques to seal the acupuncture points within Jianghu, and each technique required a different method to unseal. If the method used was inappropriate, the consequences on the body will be large. However, Ou Peng did not use any special method, he only knew the method to stimulate the acupuncture points and had confidence in his own inner energy strength because no matter the sealing technique, they were

all paper tigers when faced with a deep wave of profound inner energy.

Chapter 89: Deputy

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Deputy

After Ou Peng used his profound inner energy to unlock the sealed acupuncture points in Shui Yupeng's body, the latter realized that he was a frog in its well. The Luoshui sect he headed was nothing in comparison to these large sects with centuries of history, they could not even be mentioned in the same sentence, so he could not help but feel relieved in his current choice.

At that moment, Ou Peng said, "Brother Shui does not have to be too regretful, our Piaomiao sect has uncountable books for your viewing. If you have the time in the future, you can come to the secret books repository for a look. There are many martial arts that you can consider even if the inner energy cultivation manuals are of no use, there are still martial arts that do not have any inner cultivation requirements, and even if brother Shui is still unable to learn them, it will allow you to discern your shortcomings and will still be beneficial to your growth."

Shui Yupeng bowed in gratefulness, "Many thanks to sect master's approval."

Ou Peng patted Shui Yupeng's shoulders and smiled, he said, "We are already brothers of the same family yet brother Shui is still being so courteous. Alright, quickly go change your clothes, our other fellow brothers from the sect are still waiting for us, and they have been waiting for a long while for brother Shui to join them."

At that moment, fifth elder Liu who was still sitting quietly could wait no longer, and if not for Ou Peng's previous sting, he would have gotten out of his seat a long time ago. Upon hearing the former sentence, he immediately jumped up and cursed, " , sect master Shui, hurry and take a shower. By this time, an egg

would have hatched from all of our mouths. Hurry, hurry, let's go drink together."

Shui Yupeng smiled apologetically, "I will go right now, my fellow brothers can go ahead first."

Shui Yupeng followed fourth elder Shangguan to the rest area to change his clothes while the other people chatted in joy among themselves as they returned to the discussion hall.

The discussion hall was still filled with laughter and joyful chatter, but everyone was feeling strange in their hearts, why had sect master Ou not returned after leaving for so long, and when was this celebratory banquet going to start?

Ou Yan would look towards the entrance of the discussion hall every once in a while was conversing with big sister Qin in a low tone. Upon seeing Ou Peng and the other people's return, she finally heaved a sigh of relief, and when she noticed that her brother's expression seemed to be happier than before, Ou Yan knew instantly that her brother had accomplished another big matter, only what matter could it be?

Ou Peng entered the discussion hall and walked to seat. However, he did not sit down and turned around instead to face the audience, he said, "Fellow brothers and sisters, I believe that you have become impatient from waiting for so long. Well, you can wait no longer because I formally announce that the banquet had officially begun! No one will be spared from getting drunk later on."

Everyone was even more surprised when they realized that the banquet was going to be held inside the discussion hall, it seemed that their sect master was really happy and they immediately shouted in unison, "Thanks sect master, we will definitely drink to our heart's content."

The speech was followed by the people and some attendants carrying the sumptuous food and wine inside the discussion hall, and the banquet was off with a vibrant start.

All the food and wine were brought in not long after, and everyone quietened down to wait for their sect master to make the first toast. However, they were astonished to see that Ou Peng was still sitting comfortably in his seat with no

intention of getting up, and some even began to murmur to each other.

Suddenly, two people stepped from outside into the discussion hall. The man in front was someone they were familiar with, it was Shangguan Fengliu of the six Piaomiao tigers, and a white robed man was following closely behind. The man seemed to be slightly exhausted but there were hints of joy in his eyes, his forehead was slightly higher and it presented an unordinary disposition, even though he did not look similar to Ou Peng, both men had striking similarities to each other. The audience instinctively brought their sect master up to compare with this man, but was unable to decide which man would come out better, and they all wondered who could this man be?

When the white robed man followed Shangguan Fengliu all the way to Ou Peng's front, the latter personally stood up and allowed the white robed man to take his seat. Everyone's suspicion grew even thicker; who was this unfamiliar man with such high status in their sect?

Just as the crowd was murmuring among each other, Ou Peng stood forward and lifted his wine cup to say, "Fellow brothers and sister in our sect, this toast is to all of you who are seated here today. Under everyone's combined effort, Piaomiao sect has steadily improved to reach where we are today. I hope that everyone would continue to work in unison to bring our family to an even better position, and every day will be a closer step to greater prosperity. Piaomiao is my home, and its advancement is due to everyone's effort. Here, I toast to everyone."

After finishing his speech, he gulped down the wine in his hand in one swallow.

When everyone heard his speech, their spirits rose considerably and they shouted in unison, "Many thanks to sect master, Piaomiao is our home, cheers!"

Everyone downed their wine and sat down again.

Ou Peng lifted his second cup of wine and said, "Before I toast this second cup of wine, I would like to introduce everyone to a person. You all might have not seen him before but I assure you that if I share his identity, you will know who he is."

When he spoke up to here, he gently pulled the white robed man who was sitting beside and said, "This is the head of Luoshui sect, sect master Shui

Yupeng.”

The whole discussion hall suddenly turned still, true, they have not met this man before but Luoshui sect’s reputation has spread far and wide. Furthermore, Piaomiao sect had prepared for such a long time and this banquet was to celebrate their victory against the Luoshui sect, so now that the opposing party head was sitting in front of them, who would not be able to guess the reason why so?”

Upon seeing the looks of understanding on everyone’s faces, Ou Peng nodded in satisfaction and said, “This second toast is for our respected sect master Shi, to celebrate his admittance into our Piaomiao sect!”

His words were like a fire to a candle which immediately set up an uproar of passion among the audience. Everyone lifted their wine cups and looked warmly towards Ou Peng and Shui Yupeng. Even though they had taken down the core of Luoshui sect, the latter’s power was not fully assimilated to theirs. However, if Shui Yupeng did not cast his lot with Piaomiao sect, there would be future conflicts arising from the dissidence, and injuries or deaths will be hard to avoid. Now that he did so, there would be no need for any further fighting so everyone was very happy and drank their second cup of wine excitedly.

Ou Peng waited for the crowd to quieten down before he lifted the third cup of wine and smiled to everyone, “This third cup of wine is to toast the new deputy of our Piaomiao sect.”

Upon hearing his words, everyone was stumped into silence. Deputy? Strange, why had they not heard of this matter before? Everyone turned their sights towards the six Piaomiao tigers, but the four of them were looking at their noses, and their noses were pointed to their hearts, they were expressionless and only fifth elder Liu Qingyang was exchanging cups of wine with Shi Niu with no one else in their sight.

Ou Peng could feel the whole atmosphere of the hall within the control of his palms, and he quite enjoyed the feeling. Seeing the looks of anticipation on their faces, he smiled and explained, “Even though Luoshui sect has agreed to join our sect, none of our own members from Piaomiao are proficient in the affairs over water. For our Piaomiao sect to expand even further, we’ll need to change our

bad habit of walking on one leg and expanding our influence by land only. We have to be ambidextrous, to be proficient in both land and water, in order to gain true strength and go on the right path of expansion. Therefore, I intend to use Luoshui sect as a pilot, to be our specialist in water-based “assistance”. I will give them a high degree of freedom to manage their own affairs, and this policy will hold steady for the next two decades. The future sect master of Luoshui sect will be called “vice chief” and he will also be the deputy sect master of our Piaomiao sect. henceforth, the first vice chief from Luoshui sect will be deputy sect master Shui Yupeng. Come, please welcome him together.”

Shui Yupeng who was standing beside him became dumbstruck, the events of that day had been too stimulating as if he was jumping off a cliff. He was sitting comfortably at the peak of Luoshui sect before being brought down to lowest trough as a prisoner of the Piaomiao sect, and at one point even thought that his life was going to end when the long sword slashed towards him. Unexpectedly, Ou Peng decided to rope him in, and appealed to him and his family in order to work towards their goal of reaching the peak of Jianghu. After pledging himself willingly to the Piaomiao sect, he thought that he would only be slightly more than a figurehead and had intended to participate in the celebration in a low key manner. However, the previous few sentences by Ou Peng had catapulted him into the spotlight, and he was now standing at a place even higher than his previous position before. He was in disbelief and immediately said, “Sect master, this... this is too frightening. Your brother might suddenly get a heart attack, you cannot play around with him like this.”

Ou Peng laughed heartily and said, “Deputy sect master Shui, do I look like I am joking to you? Our Piaomiao sect is most particular about morals, brother Shui has led Luoshui sect for so many years and his heroic heart is common knowledge to everyone, even the members of Piaomiao sect have much respect towards you. Since you had previously led Luoshui sect, how could our fellow brothers from Luoshui sect be appeased if I do not grant you the post of deputy sect chief? Not being able to enjoy the benefits of a normal member, and having to point their face down in front of them, even someone who is a stranger to Jianghu who call our actions unreasonable if we did that. This title of deputy sect master will be conferred to someone from the Luoshui sect no matter what, and now that I have announced it to my whole sect, surely brother Shui does not

expect me to swallow my own words?”

Shui Yupeng grabbed onto Ou Peng in an agitated manner and said, “This organization, I have finally found the right place. I have not felt this kind of warmth in the Luoshui sect even after being the sect master for so long. The Piaomiao sect gives me a feeling closer to home, and now that I have sold these hundred and twenty jin to the Piaomiao sect, I hope brother Luo would use me as he wish.”

Ou Peng was equally happy and he grabbed onto Shui Yupeng’s hands and said, “Alright brother, these words from you are sufficient for me. I believe that under the effort of us two brothers, we can catch up to Dalin temple and Chuanxiang church to become one of the world’s largest hegemony.”

Chapter 90: Training together

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Training together

The people in the banquet were in a celebratory mood when they heard the picture painted by sect master Ou about his plans for their future. Everyone was excited as if chicken blood was spilled and they exchanged toasts generously with one another as though the whole Jianghu world had already belonged to the Piaomiao sect.

There were naturally people who were still clear-headed in the discussion hall. These included Ou Peng who was surrounded by people asking to exchange toasts, the other six tigers of Piaomiao, the smooth talking Ou Yan who would taste a sip from her wine cups every now and then, and a few other people. There was no lack of sharp people in Jianghu, but not many were able to direct their peers and spread their thoughts to other people. Even though these people knew that their sect master's words were not likely to come true, the Jianghu was bathed with a red sunset everyday so why not celebrate each day as it comes with their friends and fellow peers?

Outside the discussion hall was a night full of laughter.

A few days after the banquet, Shui Yupeng rushed to Luoshui sect to regain command and reconsolidate their powers, and under his request, Ou Peng reluctantly loaned Shangguan Fengliu and a thousand elites to accompany him to help deal with the internal affairs of his sect.

After the blood pact was signed between Piaomiao sect and Luoshui sect, an insignificant wave rippled across the Jianghu and although most people did not take further notice of it, there were people in a few places who had the opposite reaction.

Within the main hall of thousand swords peak, Wan Chengjiu's face was ashen by several shade when he heard his subordinate's report. He gripped the armrest of his chair and said, "Now that Piaomiao sect has expanded like this, what can our thousand swords peak do about it? Does anyone have a reasonable suggestion? If not, go to the grassroots and bring a few representatives to discuss this matter with me."

In a flower pavilion within Chuanxiang church, a heart-piercing fragrance permeated, and a pair of jade white hands picked up an exquisite piece of paper with floral designs. A melodious voice sounded out, "Sect master Ou is truly a dragon among men, my eyes have not deceived me but I did not expect that you could advance to such a level, just wait and see."

Under the candlelight of a secluded room in Dalin temple, a pair of withered hands carried a small piece of paper. The person took a glance, used two fingers to pinch it causing the piece of paper of burst into flames and the ashes floated onto the floor. A hoarse voice rang out, "Wretchedly stupid. Such a tantalizing temptation was placed under their nose but they refused to eat it and got eaten up instead. This old man's efforts have been entirely wasted, it seems that I have to adjust my plans. This Piaomiao sect, you think a starving camel be compared to a horse?"

In a mysterious place, a mysterious person said mysteriously, "This Piaomiao sect is still so vibrant. Piaomiao sect... Why hasn't it been annihilated yet?"

However, all these were things that Ou Peng would never know as he and the Piaomiao sect took another firm footstep towards their goals.

The events in Piaomiao sect were not privy to Zhang Xiaohua, not to mention the consequent stirrings in the rest of Jianghu. Right at that moment, Zhang Xiaohua had reached a bottleneck in his pursuit of the fist stances in martial arts.

Although it was called a bottleneck, Zhang Xiaohua was still experiencing some improvements. After casually teaching Zhang Xiaohua the foundational fist stances, the four men from Piaomiao sect moved on to share the various random fist martial arts they had come across, such as the Liu family fist, Cai family fist, Li family fist, Mo family fist, Wu family fist, Xue family fist. However, a stranger phenomenon occurred. Like previously before, Zhang Xiaohua would

forget the more he practiced, and would only retain three to four stances in his memory after the night practice session. But when it came to the next day, he would forget everything, and even if he was taught the same fist martial art again, the results would repeat themselves the next day, causing He Tianshu to scratch out the back of his ears.

In He Tianshu's perspective, Zhang Xiaohua was considered a genius for being able to exert more than five hundred jin of strength in one arm without any prior martial art training, and even though strength was not too important to the people in Jianghu, it was heart-moving just thinking of the results after combining it with some martial arts training. Even though the boy's age was too old to achieve greater accomplishments in the future, and he would never be on par with people like Shi Niu, it was more than possible to change the current situation of He Tianshu and the rest. However, why was this Zhang Xiaohua such an idiot? There was really nothing else to say, even though the boy did not seem to have any problem with his mental faculties, but he just simply could not pick up any martial arts. He was even unable to remember the simplest entry-level martial arts, not to mention that he still did not know any inner energy cultivation method. At least few days ago, even when Zhang Xiaohua could not pick up everything, he still managed to retain some knowledge, and perhaps became more enlightened on the way. However, now that the situation had come to this, He Tianshu was feeling thoroughly disheartened, his final opinion was, Zhang Xiaohua was like a rotten block of wood that could not be sculpted into anything useful at all.

Hence, He Tianshu said this to the boy, "Zhang Xiaohua, your martial arts has reached a bottleneck, and to break through this bottleneck would require a timely opportunity. I will not teach you any new martial arts for now, you can continue to practice on the previous ones you have learnt, and after you break through this bottleneck, I will teach you more martial arts again," and left Zhang Xiaohua in the lurch as the latter continued to hold his horse stance and ponder about the incomplete martial arts he managed to retain.

At least Zhang Xiaohua still had diligence. He would get up the moment the sun appeared in the sky, and would not return to his room until it was late in the night, while spending most of his time at the same spot practicing his incomplete

martial arts no matter rain or shine, or even when there was lightning in the sky. His determination led He Tianshu to feel touched, but when the latter reminded himself of Zhang Xiaohua's frighteningly poor memory, he would give up any further thoughts and not place any hope of the boy anymore.

He Tianshu was not the only person who was moved by Zhang Xiaohua's diligence, the one-armed elder Yu would watch Zhang Xiaohua almost every day so he was very clear about the latter's situation. He would nod his head continuously, but his approval was reserved only for Zhang Xiaohua's determination and not for his talent in martial arts at all.

On that night, the wind was cool and gentle, and He Tianshu was in a good mood. When he saw Zhang Xiaohua fumbling around the same few stances of his, his heart moved and he called out to the boy, "Zhang Xiaohua, you must have at least learnt something after training for such a long time. How about if I let you exchange some pointers with someone with some real martial practitioners?"

Zhang Xiaohua looked up towards He Tianshu and asked, "Squad leader He, do you think I can spar with my current abilities?"

He Tianshu smiled and replied, "Why not? All top martial pugilists began from somewhere, you don't have to be afraid, I will instruct little second Nie to hold back and not take the match for real."

After finishing his sentence, he called out to one of the Piaomiao disciples who were training at a side, "Little second Nie, come over and exchange some moves with Zhang Xiaohua. You can just play around and not take the match too seriously."

Little second Nie stopped his training and went over, saying, "Alright, squad leader He, I understand."

Little second Nie adjusted his legs and raised his palms to form a stance. Upon a glance, Zhang Xiaohua thought, ah, that looked familiar, was that not the Rohan fist opening stance? Even though it was his first time in a sparring match with someone else and his palms were already perspiring, he still went along and raised his fists to match little second Nie's movements. Little second Nie shouted over, "Zhang Xiaohua, you can go first."

Zhang Xiaohua answered, "Alright, be careful, brother Nie."

After finishing his sentence, he raised his legs and stepped to the front, then thrust his right arm towards little second Nie. The latter saw Zhang Xiaohua's fist becoming bigger as he approached, and just as it was right before him, he dodged his body and used his left hand to grab onto Zhang Xiaohua's wrist while his right arm formed a fist which headed towards Zhang Xiaohua's nose bridge.

A normal person's nose bridge is soft, and even though little second Nie had held back, Zhang Xiaohua still cried reflexively until his vision blurred, and he ignored the fight to use his sleeves to wipe off his tears.

When Zhang Xiaohua wiped away all his tears, he looked again at little second Nie and said with a more determined look, "Come, elder brother Nie, let's continue."

After finishing his sentence, the two people laid out their opening stances, and the sequences of this second round followed the previous one, except that Zhang Xiaohua's speed was faster and little second Nie was unable to hold back in time as his fist hit squarely onto Zhang Xiaohua's nose bridge. Zhang Xiaohua's nose immediately began to bleed."

Zhang Xiaohua immediately jumped out of the ring and wiped off his nosebleed, he shouted, "I am not fighting, not fighting anymore. Cheater, why did you not follow the sequence?"

Everyone was astonished, if not for the period of time they spent with Zhang Xiaohua which made them less vulnerable to surprises, his words would have made them stumble onto the ground again.

The pitiful Zhang Xiaohua had expected the spar to follow the same route as the martial arts sequences, and everyone present felt, "He really cannot be expected to be self-taught, it is still better to let him follow instructions and learn slowly step by step."

After Zhang Xiaohua had settled down, He Tianshu went over to explain the meaning of exchanging pointers and the latter finally understood. Now that he thought about it, if everyone would display their martial arts sequence step by step, then where would there be the unpredictability and danger of a real fight?

On the third attempt, Zhang Xiaohua raised his guard and slowly matched little second Nie's pace and stance. Although he began moving little by little, and his postures were unnatural and out-of-place, it could be seen that he had taken his first real step to spar.

The problem was that his hands, his arm, that leg were all very stiff, like a bird that just hatched out from its egg. He could not guard against his left while guarding his right, and could not guard his top when he guarded his bottom like a clumsy big bear. When he looked at little second Nie, the latter was looking amused as though he was playing a game, yet his body's motions were extremely pretty like a butterfly fluttering around a flower. Zhang Xiaohua's movements were unable to follow his opponents, and he had already received strikes on all parts of his body. Finally, Zhang Xiaohua became frustrated again, and when he saw little second Nie performing another stance, he felt that the Erlang fist would be a good counter and exerted all his strength to slam his fist in his opponent's direction. The fist arrived in a "whoosh" to little second Nie's front and it seemed to have landed onto the other party's body. In Zhang Xiaohua's mind, the fist should have sent little second Nie flying, after all, it had five hundred jin of force in it.

Contrary to his expectations, little second Nie met his fist calmly and changed his own fist to a palm to grab onto Zhang Xiaohua's fist, while his other hand extended to grab Zhang Xiaohua's shirt. With a switch of his legs, he skillfully deflected the punch and moved Zhang Xiaohua's body to follow his momentum. Zhang Xiaohua's little body was like an arrow that shot off the bow, his feet left the ground and he flew right onto the herb fields in front. Fortunately, the ground was soft and the herbs grown in the field were common so He Tianshu did not stop him.

Actually, this was precisely the reason why He Tianshu had lost all hope on Zhang Xiaohua. No matter how strong the boy was, if he could not use his strength effectively, he would be no different from a three year old child playing casually with a thousand jin heavy hammer. While it was interesting, he might drop it on his head and even lose his own life if he was not careful.

Even though Zhang Xiaohua's strength was comparable to a thousand jin, he could not use any fist martial art or technique to make use of his strength. This

little second Nie was only an outer disciple of Piaomiao sect and he could easily take Zhang Xiaohua's life, so what would happen if it was someone else?

Zhang Xiaohua walked back without a scratch but his clothes were stained with mud and weeds were in his hair. However, he was not downcast as He Tianshu expected, and instead, there was an expression of wonder and joy on his face as he walked to little second Nie's front and urgently asked what type of martial art it was, and why he was not taught about it.

Little second Nie gave Zhang Xiaohua an innocent look, pointed towards He Tianshu and said, "Little brother, I think it will be better if squad leader He explain it to you."

Zhang Xiaohua jogged over to He Tianshu to beg him to teach that sort of martial art, but He Tianshu replied in a tone which showed that he was caught in a difficult position as well. He said, "Zhang Xiaohua, I am fully supportive of you wanting to learn new martial arts, but not everything can be done as and when you like to. If your foundation is not stable, you will not be able to learn the upper level martial arts. What little second used was not a fist martial art but an application of one, if you have not even mastered the basics, how do you expect me to teach it to you? Furthermore, this deflection technique is not just about the posture, but requires knowledge on the application of force, and it contains Piaomiao sect's unique principles. You are not a disciple of Piaomiao sect so I do not dare to teach it to you, and if you insist on learning it, then I will have to seek permission from the villa master, and only after I receive an approval will I begin to consider."

Continuing on, He Tianshu smiled apologetically and said, "To explain further, this approval will actually require layers and layers of clearance and I would not know when it will reach back to me. The upper echelons way of doing things that can be quite debatable, so I think that it is better if you concentrate on the fist stances you have been taught, and we can make further arrangements after you break your bottleneck."

After being rejected by He Tianshu, Zhang Xiaohua became dejected but he also knew that it was unlikely for him to receive the villa master's grace. He was already fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to learn fist martial arts, and He Tianshu was very kind to have taught him many different fist martial arts.

However, his mastery of fist stances was really poor so he did not have the qualifications to ask for more before brushing up on the ones he was already taught.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua's first ever martial arts sparring match ended like this. It might have been a game to little second Nie, but for Zhang Xiaohua, the latter felt as if he was initiated into a whole new world, or at least he had learnt that sparring was not simply repeating the sequences he was taught. Suddenly, a strike of inspiration hit him, wouldn't he still be able to spar with his incomplete martial arts? So why did squad leader He wanted him to master all the fist martial arts before letting him advance to the next level?

This suspicion plagued Zhang Xiaohua's mind for a long time but he had no answer to it.

Nevertheless, it did not withered down his passion to learn martial arts, and even after He Tianshu and the other Piaomiao members washed up and returned to their beds, Zhang Xiaohua continued to practice his pathetic and incomplete fist stances.

It had been more than a month since Zhang Xiaohua entered the Huanxi mountain villa, and his days were passed mostly on the medicinal fields hoeing the weeds and spraying water on the herbs which were not too different from what he was used to in Guo village. He would also not miss out on practicing his fist stances in the morning and evenings. Furthermore, the food provided were delicious and there was plenty of meat, so in Zhang Xiaohua's eyes, the days he spent there were like a dream, and he had long thrown aside any nostalgia or baggage from the past, and even almost forgot that his second brother was in the nearby Pingyang city.

Huanxi mountain villa had those few days of leave where the servants could go out or rest in their rooms. If one chose to rest in his room, the procedures were naturally straightforward and hassle-free, but if one wanted to leave the villa, it would be troublesome because approval had to be granted from the supervisor and they had to go to a place to record their absence, collect a plaque and return before the appointed time was up.

On that day, Zhang Xiaohua had finished his martial art practice and he

wrinkled his brow as he entered his room. To his surprise, Ma Jing was washing his feet in a copper basin, and he immediately turned around to the sky as he thought, “Has the sun gone up from the west today, why did this sloppy Ma Jing wash his feet?”

As the ideas popped into his mind, he hurriedly went forward and placed his hand onto Ma Jing’s forehead, and then onto his head, and said in concern, “Elder brother Ma, you do not have a fever.”

Ma Jing retorted, “I am naturally not sick, why would I have a fever? Today is such a good day and I get to go out and breathe in the fresh air, why would I want to fall sick?”

Zhang Xiaohua was confused and he asked, “Elder brother Ma, what do you mean? The air in the mountain villa is fresh every day, except in our room.”

Ma Jing thinned his lips and said, “You old mud hat, what do you know? No matter how fresh the air is here, it cannot compare to the fragrance in drunken fragrance house.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, even though he had never gone to those places before, with a roommate like Ma Jing who would chatter about it beside his ear all day, he would naturally know what kind of place it was.

Zhang Xiaohua felt his heart moved and he asked, “Elder brother Ma, I have always heard you talking about drunken fragrance house, so are you going there today?”

Ma Jing carefully looked at his surroundings and whispered, “You little punk, you are still so young yet you know too much. Your elder brother Ma is going to patronize their services, so why? Do you want to follow?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied carefully, “Elder brother Ma, you are wrong. I was only asking, I have been in the mountain villa for only a month and not gone out before, I heard that we are allowed to leave every month so I wanted to follow elder brother Ma to Pingyang city. I will probably look around and not go to drunken fragrance house.”

Ma Jing cocked his head and pondered, he did not want Zhang Xiaohua to spoil his grand plans so he simply nodded, which could be counted as an agreement.

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed and he thanks the other party profusely before tidying his room quickly and sat on his bed to wait for Ma Jing.

While he thought that Ma Jing would be done soon, Zhang Xiaohua was amazed to see Ma Jing packing this and tidying that, grooming himself from head to toe and changing himself from inside out. Zhang Xiaohua felt as though he had just experienced something new, where was the usual sloppy Ma Jing, the person in front of him was a suave, fair-faced gentleman.

Zhang Xiaohua looked on with his eyes wide until he noticed that the sun had passed three poles and the time was not early anymore. This Ma Jing took more time than a lady to prepare himself, he could not contain his impatience and asked, "Elder brother Ma, can you be a little faster? The day is getting late."

Who knew that Ma Jing would maintain his composure, look at his reflection in the mirror again, and say, "There is no need to rush, the ladies in drunken fragrance house are probably still in their dreams at this hour, where can I go this early in the day?"

Zhang Xiaohua was so angry that his nose twisted and he almost fainted onto his bed. Fortunately, he had mingled long enough with Ma Jing to know better, so he went into a horse stance and stopped himself from falling down.

Chapter 91: Leaving the villa

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Leaving the villa

Just as Zhang Xiaohua's patience was about to run dry, Ma Jing finally completed his necessary makeover.

The latter then waltzed around to collect the things he needed, took out some coins from the small cabinet at the head of the bed, weighed them in his hands before smiling lecherously.

Zhang Xiaohua was looking on from the side and he shook his head thinking, "That smile looks just like a yellow rat fox that is about to visit a pen of chickens."

However, he suddenly became anxious. Looking at the coins in Ma Jing's hands, he seemed to realize that he had forgotten something important. When they departed from Guo village, all the money was passed to Zhang Xiaohu for safe keeping, and since the he and his second brother split apart in Lotus escort, he had only brought his knapsack which did not contain any money with him. Since he did not require its use while living in the mountain villa, he had naturally forgotten about it. Now that he wanted to leave for the day, it was not a good idea to not carry any money at all.

Of course, Zhang Xiaohua immediately recalled that on his journey to the mountain villa, elder sister Qiu Tong seemed to have mentioned that working in the mountain villa would entitle him to three coins each month, only that he was unaware of the method to collect his pay. However, he could not look for Qiu Tong just for this matter, Zhang Xiaohua would have at least learnt that Qiu Tong resided in the inner courtyard of the mountain villa after staying in the mountain villa during this period, and that the inner courtyard was where all the

females stayed so it was inappropriate for a servant to go over. Furthermore, Qiu Tong's position in the mountain villa did not seem to be low, so instead of being impolite to find her over such a small matter, why not ask Ma Jing who was right in front of him?

As he thought up to here, Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said to Ma Jing, "Elder brother Ma, I have a question for you."

Ma Jing slanted his eyes and said, "Just say it, brother. There is nothing elder brother not know in this mountain villa."

However, when he felt Zhang Xiaohua's gaze resting on the coins in his hands, his face changed immediately as he kept the coins in his breast and snapped back, "Except to lend you money."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "That, elder brother Ma, the matter I wanted to ask is indeed about money."

Ma Jing firmly insisted, "No, it is not."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Yes it is."

Ma Jing was displeased and he said, "Look brother, elder brother has no money to lend you, and my words are the hard truth."

Zhang Xiaohua saw that Ma Jing was unhappy so he stopped teasing the latter and said, "Elder brother Ma, little brother is not asking you to lend me money, but to ask you about the pay for this month."

Ma Jing rolled his eyes and looked at Zhang Xiaohua's expression to ascertain that the latter was not borrowing money, and he heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Alright, little punk, you have already learnt to make a fool of me after just a few days in the mountain villa."

Zhang Xiaohua quickly smiled obligingly and said, "Look at what you said, elder brother Ma. If not for your tutoring, how would I be able to improve that fast? Which is why if someone asks me who am I most grateful to, the first person I will thank is elder brother Ma."

Ma Jing walked over and patted on Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders with force. Even though he did not put in much strength, Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders shivered,

and his heart shivered another time as he thought secretly, “Will he be making me wash his clothes now?”

After patting Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders, Ma Jing said in satisfaction, “Xiaohua you have done well, elder brother will teach you another, that is if you want to express your gratitude, the first person does not have to be me, the second one will do.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he asked humbly, “Elder brother Ma, then should I put my parents first instead?”

Ma Jing answered in a solemn tone, “Wrong, Xiaohua. It is alright to be grateful to your parents, but you must thank the mountain villa first and foremost. Even though filial piety cannot be wrong, your heart must always have a place for the mountain villa, and always put it at the top of your priorities. Of course, if you mention elder brother, I will feel happy because it shows that you do not need moral education lessons, although there is still room for improvement. Oh right, you will have to thank the villa master, because she gave you the opportunity to be grateful to the mountain villa and elder brother, as well as the rights to be grateful to your parents.”

Zhang Xiaohua put on a studious, serious face as he nodded like a chick pecking on rice.

After finishing his sentence, Ma Jing turned his head around again and said, “Oh right, Xiaohua, what did you say just now, I did not manage to catch you.”

Zhang Xiaohua was exasperated as he said, “Elder brother Ma, I asked you previously that since I have worked here for more than a month and not collected my pay yet, what am I supposed to do to collect it?”

Ma Jing stared at Zhang Xiaohua from head to toe as though he had some opinion and said, “Xiaohua-ah, looking at your body, what should have grown has already grown, and you have probably passed your puberty so it is the appropriate time to think about certain things. However, elder brother must share his advice with you. The ladies in the drunken fragrance house would require a certain standard of payment before they meet their clients, and just based on one month’s pay is not likely to be enough. If you insist on going your own way, then there is still the option of borrowing some pay in advance from

the supervisor's room. However, while I have tried this before, you may not be able to because you are new here."

Zhang Xiaohua did not know whether to laugh or cry and he explained, "Elder brother Ma, look at what you are saying. I do not have such an elegant hobby like you, I only..."

Ma Jing cut in without listening to Zhang Xiaohua's explanation and said urgently, "Xiaohua, elder brother will share one more piece of advice with you. Even if you do not go to drunken fragrance house, you must avoid those small brothels along the dark alleys. There was one time when elder brother made such a misstep, also because I did not have enough money, and caught a dirty illness from there. The illness made death felt even more preferable, no I will stop my description at up to here, just even thinking about it makes my skin crawl. In short, it is really not worth the risk at all. Elder brother shall lend you some money now, so do not endanger your little body."

After he finished his speech, Ma Jing reached out to the cabinet at the head of his bed but Zhang Xiaohua immediately pulled him back and said in a touched voice, "Can elder brother Ma listen to my explanation first? I was only thinking of drawing this month pay and going to Pingyang city to stroll and shop, you have though too far ahead."

Ma Jing asked in an investigative tone, "Are you sure, Xiaohua? You do not need elder brother to lend you money?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and replied, "Elder brother Ma, I am very, surely, hundred percent sure."

Even though Ma Jing has misunderstood the situation, his willingness to lend Zhang Xiaohua money made the latter moved beyond tears, and it diminished greatly the shadow of his smelly foot in Zhang Xiaohua's impression of him.

Ma Jing then continued to explain to Zhang Xiaohua, "This monthly pay from the mountain villa is not given every month but stored in an account in the accounts room. If you need money, you can collect your pay at any time from the accounts room. If not, it will continue to accumulate until the day you leave the mountain villa when it will be settled in sum. Of course, you can also choose to collect your money and store it in your cabinet like what I do."

Zhang Xiaohua pondered before deciding to withdraw his first month's pay. If he did so, he could perhaps buy something which caught his eye in Pingyang city, and then give the remainder to his second brother Zhang Xiaohu. Even though he had no use for money in the mountain villa, perhaps his second brother has some need for it. At most, his brother could hold on to it, although it would be better if they found a way to send it back to their family at home.

When he thought up to here, Zhang Xiaohua asked Ma Jing again, "Elder brother Ma, do you know if there is any way to send the money from here to my home in Lu town?"

Ma Jing smiled and said, "That is possible of course. If you know anyone who is returning to Lu town, you can ask him to write a letter and help you bring the money back home. If not, you can go to the carriage station where they will do it for you. However, the carriage station will impose a fee for such a service, and I am unsure as to how much it will cost. They all have their own prices, you can find out more when you go over. But I have also heard that they may charge irregular prices, and the fees are quite expensive. Do you think that the authorities should do something about such lousy service, it is a menace to the society to have such a pricing system."

"Oh right", just as Ma Jing was about to finish his sentences, he added one last line, "You really do not intend to borrow some money to visit the drunken fragrance house? I am very familiar with that place and can introduce to you some good ones there."

By the time Zhang Xiaohua stood back up, Ma Jing was done packing up and had walked out of the small room. Zhang Xiaohua chased after him although he was still dizzy from Ma Jing's words.

Zhang Xiaohua then followed Ma Jing to the accounts room to withdraw his pay. The accounts room was at another side of the mountain villa and it took them quite a while to reach there. The man at the counter was an old pedant who upon seeing Ma Jing wrinkled his brow obviously and said, "Ma-Pi Jing (Horse fart demon), why have you come over again, haven't you withdrawn your pay for the month? Do you want to borrow on credit again?"

"Ma-Pi Jing?" Zhang Xiaohua wanted to laugh when he heard the nickname, he

thought that it really suited Ma Jing and was smooth on the tongue. When he thought back to Ma Jing's behavior every day, he really did behave like a Ma-Pi Jing most of the time. However, why had he not heard of it yet after being here for so long?

Actually, this nickname Ma-Pi Jing had been used many times in the past, but as more of the older servants left and got replaced, the number of people using it naturally grew fewer. When Ma Jing came over to the accounts room and was called this again, he would usually feel a sense of intimacy but now that a new little brother was here this day, his face turned slightly red and he immediately went forward to say, "Look at what Mr Tong is saying, even though I, Ma Jing, am not an exemplary person, I would not come over to borrow money every so often, and when I do, it was because of difficulties in my life. I have come over to bring this new brother over to withdraw his pay, so stop staring at me like a criminal."

Old Mr Tong muttered, "You are right, you don't come every so often, you just come seven to eight times each year."

He then turned his head to Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Little punk, what is your name? Are you here to withdraw part or all of your money?"

Zhang Xiaohua quickly went forward and said respectfully, "Old Mr Tong, my name is Zhang Xiaohua. I have only been here for a month, and since that is not a lot of pay, I would like to withdraw all of it today."

Old Mr Tong looked at Zhang Xiaohua and said in an uncomfortable voice, "It is fine if I withdraw everything out for you since it is your money, but you have to be careful to spend it wisely." After he said his advice, he turned his head back to Ma Jing.

Ma Jing seemed to have noticed old Mr Tong's glare and he immediately raised his head to look at the ceiling in the accounts room, inspecting the large rose design carved on its surface.

Zhang Xiaohua lowered his brows and squinted his eyes to say, "Don't worry, old Mr Tong. I planned to pass the money to my second elder brother to see if he has a need for it, and perhaps he will find a way later to post it back to our parents."

Upon listening to his answer, old Mr Tong seemed very happy and he said, “Good, you are a good kid not like some other people who would take his hard earned money and spend it on frivolous things. Not only did he not raise his civility, he came back with some disease instead.”

Ma Jing’s face turned even redder as he inspected the ceiling design more closely.

The procedure to withdraw was very simple, one only had to sign or leave a thumbprint beside his name in the record book. Because it was Zhang Xiaohua’s first time, he left a thumbprint and not long later, everything was settled and he carefully placed his first ever paycheck into his breast before bidding the old man Tong farewell. Old Mr Tong seemed to have a liking for Zhang Xiaohua and he would throw some advice now and then in a warm tone like he was speaking to his own grandson. When he saw that Zhang Xiaohua was done, Ma Jing finished his inspection of the ceiling and pulled the former away as they vanished into a puff of smoke, leaving old Mr Tong behind with his jaws hung at the bottom.

When old Mr Tong turned around, he suddenly stopped in his tracks and said, “This is not right, how could Zhang Xiaohua’s allowance be higher than Ma-Pi Jing? Why did I miss that out just now? Could the supervisor have made a mistake?”

He then recovered his posture and walked slowly back into the room, thinking in his heart, “If the supervisor has made a mistake it is none of my business. I have followed to the letter and given Zhang Xiaohua his allowance as according to the books, and the boy seemed to be quite obedient so it is fine if he got more this month, serves them right for making a mistake.”

All these were naturally not known to Zhang Xiaohua and Ma Jing as they walked towards the entrance of the mountain villa.

The last time Zhang Xiaohua came up the mountain, he sat on a horse carriage and entered from a large back door. However, the accounts room was not on that route so Ma Jing led him to the exit from another direction. What Zhang Xiaohua was unaware of was that the accounts room was not far from the back door, and it did not take them long in the end before they reached the back door. However, this back door was always guarded, and even though Ma Jing

had tried to befriend the guards, the other party had made their stance clear that he was not of the same status as them. Even though it was Zhang Xiaohua's first time leaving the villa, there was already a record of his name in the book, and naturally had to follow a different procedure to leave. Zhang Xiaohua was finished very quickly, and the two received their respective waist token as they left the backdoor. The two had minute differences in their waist token but Ma Jing did not notice them, and Zhang Xiaohua was even more clueless as they kept the tokens into their breast.

As they exited from the door, Zhang Xiaohua became nervous and asked, "Elder brother Ma, this is not right. I remembered that this was not the door I came in from."

Ma Jing smiled as he explained, "Our Huanxi mountain villa has five backdoors and one front door, how would I know which door you entered from previously, oh right, brother, you have to keep this waist token safe because it has to be returned when you come back. It will be very troublesome if you lose it so always be careful with it."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, "I naturally know this. However, elder brother Ma, what time will you return in the night? I would want to follow you back to the villa, if not, I am afraid that I will forget the way back here."

Ma Jing pursed his lips and said, "Look at how cautious you are, isn't it our familiar mountain villa after we pass through the back door, why will you still lose your way, I do not know when I will return in the night, you can wait in this door room if you like."

Zhang Xiaohua answered with a bitter face, "Alright, elder brother Ma, you must remember to come back early."

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua had once again forgotten about Ma Jing's smelly foot, or how he would try to avoid the man, and he behaved instead like a wife who was waiting for her husband to come back home.

It was already June then, and the weather was hot and sunny in the noon. Zhang Xiaohua raised his head to look at the scorching sun as he accused Ma Jing in his heart for taking so long to prepare, resulting in him having to journey across such a hot weather.

When he reached the straight highway again, Zhang Xiaohua assumed that Ma Jing would walk towards the shaded path along the highway, but the latter unexpectedly turned into a small alley road and went down from there. Zhang Xiaohua became anxious and he hurriedly chased after Ma Jing and said, “Elder brother Ma, you have gone the wrong way, we should walk by the highway.”

When he saw Ma Jing’s surprised face as he turned around, Zhang Xiaohua thought that he had made a mistake and immediately said, “Could it be that elder brother Ma is hungry, looking at the time now, it should be alright to eat something.”

When Ma Jing heard his words, he burst out into laughter and said, “Brother, you won’t be thinking of walking to Pingyang city right.”

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brow and said, “Of course we have to walk to Pingyang city, we do not have our own carriage and the mountain villa does not provide us with one.”

Ma Jing laughed as he said, “Brother, you don’t mean to say that you also walked from Pingyang city to come here?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “No, I sat on the horse carriage to come here. Oh, could it be that there is also a horse carriage station that travels between Pingyang city and our villa?”

Ma Jing did not answer the boy as he waved his hands and motioned Zhang Xiaohua to follow him.

Indeed, Zhang Xiaohua’s guess was on the spot. There was a huge courtyard at the end of the alley, and a large banner hung above which wrote “There must be a road to the mountain, and there will be carriages wherever they are roads.” While a smaller banner hung below which wrote “Biaochi”. It turned out that there was another branch of the horse carriage station which Zhang Xiaohua patronized to reach Pingyang city.

Zhang Xiaohua knew that he was lacking in the knowledge of the world so he kept his silence as Ma Jing settled their arrangements. Not long after, a small carriage which could seat two to three people travelled over and stopped at the entrance of the courtyard to wait for its passengers to board.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's blank expression, Ma Jing pulled Zhang Xiaohua as they got up the carriage, while not forgetting to say, "Brother, since this is the first time you are going out with elder brother, this horse carriage fee will be on me. The next time we leave together, it will be your treat for the carriage."

Zhang Xiaohua was filled with joy when he got on the carriage and did not bother about Ma Jing's words. It had been a long time since he met his second elder brother and he wondered how the latter was doing in Lotus escort. On the day of his second brother's recruitment test, he heard that his second brother had good aptitude in martial arts so he must have learnt many fist stances by now. As he thought back to his martial arts which were neither here nor there, Zhang Xiaohua looked forward to watching his second brother as the latter displayed his martial arts.

However, the carriage was indeed very comfortable, it was unbearably hot outside and when he thought back to the time he and his brother walked on foot to Pingyang city, he wondered why had neither of them thought of hiring a horse carriage instead? He also wondered if there were these horse carriages in Lu town, because if there was such, he would not have to borrow a wagon. Even from Guo village to Bali Gou, there would be a use for such a service so he would not have to wake up so early just to reach there by noon. Thinking of Bali Gou, he wondered how his eldest brother and sister-in-law have been doing. Has his eldest brother recovered fully yet? How were his parents' health, and how were the fields in the household, and what about the little field he reclaimed himself. All these thoughts made him reminisce about home, and without realizing it, he was fully preoccupied with his thoughts.

When Ma Jing saw Zhang Xiaohua's stillness, he assumed that the latter was resting as it was noon so he did not talk to the boy. Had he known what Zhang Xiaohua was thinking, he would be laughing until his teeth dropped.

Chapter 92: Trip friend

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Trip friend

With the shelter of the carriage, the scorching sunlight in the noon could not do much to bother Zhang Xiaohua as he sat in the carriage and thought back to the time when his second brother and he first arrived in Pingyang city. Zhang Xiaohua thought in his heart, “No wonder most people would prefer the city life, this feeling is really different, and the quality of life is that much higher. These luxuries cannot be found in the village even if one is willing to pay for them, I wonder how much does this trip actually cost? Never mind, it is better not to ask or Ma Jing will start nagging again.”

The sound of the horse tottering continued for roughly two kettles of tea worth of time before the tall entrance of Pingyang city came into view. Upon seeing Pingyan city again, Zhang Xiaohua did not become surprised as he did before as the sight was no longer unfamiliar. A person’s ability to adapt is frightening; three looks were enough to make something mundane. Even if an object is extremely valuable, looking at it every day would make it appear normal.

As the carriage entered the city, Zhang Xiaohua assumed that it would head towards the carriage station but unexpectedly, it turned in another direction. Even though Zhang Xiaohua was still not familiar with the city, he could recognize the general direction of the carriage so he asked Ma Jing, “Elder brother Ma Jing, the carriage station doesn’t seem to be in this direction, or did I remember wrongly?”

Ma Jing’s patience had long been grinded down by Zhang Xiaohua’s endless questions, he looked at the boy and snapped, “The carriage station is not in this direction, but drunken fragrance house is.”

Upon hearing his answer, Zhang Xiaohu immediately stood up, and fortunately he was still short so he did not reach the carriage's shelter. His sudden movement frightened Ma Jing who asked, "What's wrong brother?"

Zhang Xiaohua's face flushed as he said, "Elder brother Ma, I am really not going to drunken fragrance house, why don't you let me down the carriage now."

Ma Jing looked at Zhang Xiaohua's distress and he laughed heartily before calling over to the driver in front, "Driver, please stop for a while for my brother to get down."

The driver stopped the carriage as instructed and Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly jumped off in fear of being sent to drunken fragrance house.

Ma Jing turned his upper body and called out from the carriage, "Brother, do you know where the carriage station is? You can go there to find a carriage when you go back, do not forget that. Also, where are you heading to, I can get the carriage to send you there later."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "Alright, elder brother Ma, I don't need the carriage to send me off. Just remember to go back earlier tonight."

After finishing his sentence, he waved his hands and ran off.

"Go back early? Elder brother had such a hard time coming out, it will be strange if I went back early instead." Ma Jing thought to himself as a lecherous smile appeared on his face.

Zhang Xiaohua ran for quite a distance before he felt that the carriage was far enough before he slowed his footsteps and went to a nearby store to get directions to Lotus escort.

Even though it was noon, the wide main road was crowded with people like silk threads on a cloth. Zhang Xiaohua weaved in and out the crowd as while keeping his vigilance up for any pickpockets. Even though his money pouch was not on his waist and in his breast, Zhang Xiaohua was still not at ease as he thought of the incident when he caught a thief when he and his brother walked around the streets for the first time, which was also quite funny.

Just as he was thinking of the past, he suddenly recognized a familiar figure.

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned for a moment, it was really speak of the devil as he did not know many people in Pingyang city, and if this person was not Zhang Xiaohu then he could only be the pickpocket. Seeing the thief tailing behind his next target, Zhang Xiaohua felt that the situation was funny and he quickened his pace towards them.

As Zhang Xiaohua had expected, there was a scholar in front of the thief fanning himself with one hand as he looked around the street. The scholar would stop whenever he saw something interesting at a roadside stall, to browse some old books occasionally, or purchase a bit of ink and paper. The money pouch was dangling continuously as he walked, and the thief wagging his head along with it. Despite having followed the scholar for a while, the thief still could not find an opportunity and just at that moment, the crowd was slightly thinner and there was a clear path for escape. The thief increased his pace and got closer to the scholar, while Zhang Xiaohua who was behind naturally went forward to stop him. However, Zhang Xiaohua was more careful this time, he recalled the previous time when the thief's accomplice came up from behind to help the thief escape and guessed that the same people must be in the vicinity right then. If he rushed forward to stop the thief, the other accomplices might come forward and he would not be a match for them. Without his second brother around, he could not be assured of his own safety and thought back to Liu Kai and teacher Liu's advice, although it was good to help a person in need, one must still consider his own safety. Hence, what should he do at that situation?

Seeing that the thief has extended his hands while the scholar was still looking at the signboards hung outside the shops, an idea struck Zhang Xiaohua's mind and he shouted out loudly, "Big brother Zhang, what are you doing here?"

Zhang Xiaohua's voice was loud and clear causing several people in the surroundings to look at him, especially those whose surnames were Zhang. The scholar also responded by turning his head back, and the thief immediately retracted his hands and looked away to another side stall to pretend to buy something.

When the scholar turned his head back, Zhang Xiaohua was also surprised because it was someone he recognized as well. He was actually the scholar who took the same carriage as him and his brother from Lu town all the way over to

Pingyang city, Li Jinfeng. There were many coincidental meetings on that particular day, Zhang Xiaohua did not know that many people within the city including the thief, but he had met two people he recognized so far. Zhang Xiaohua continued to smile as he walked to the front, and Li Jinfeng was also curious because his impression of Zhang Xiaohua was not very deep. Nevertheless, they had spent quite some time together in the same carriage, and upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua walking up to him and none of the surrounding people responding, he guessed that the latter was looking for him.

Zhang Xiaohua walked over and called, "Hi elder brother Li."

Li Jinfeng asked curiously, "You are Zhang... Zhang Xiaohua right, it has been over a month and I almost forgot your name. However, I am still better than you, why did you call me big brother Zhang just now?"

When the thief who was at a side noticed that the two knew each other, and even recognized Zhang Xiaohua as the boy who chased after himself previously, he disappeared the moment the two exchanged greetings. Zhang Xiaohua then explained what he saw about the thief to Li Jinfeng. Li Jinfeng felt around waist for his money pouch and estimated that Zhang Xiaohua was telling the truth, so he said happily, "Thanks to you, the money for my living expenses this month is still safe. I must really thank you properly for your help."

Zhang Xiaohua naturally declined and said, "Big brother Li is too courteous, and we are old acquaintances after all. Even strangers would help each other if they could, so if you want to thanks me for such a little thing, then it will be demeaning the relationship we built in the horse carriage."

Li Jinfeng felt that Zhang Xiaohua's words were reasonable and his admiration for the boy grew, he realized that this child in front of him was no longer the same person he met a month ago. Li Jinfeng thought that Zhang Xiaohua had matured into someone who was no longer naive and even had a magnanimous air which made him grew a liking towards him as though the latter was like his own younger brother. He patted Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders gently and said, "Alright, since you said so, I won't be too courteous around you. As fellow drifters from the same town, don't hesitate to find me next time if you ever need my help."

He then shared his address with Zhang Xiaohua who carefully noted it down in his heart.

Li Jinfeng looked strangely at Zhang Xiaohua's azure robes and little hat and he asked, "What are you doing here? Why are you dressed like that? Did some large family employ you as a servant? What about your elder brother?"

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua recounted the recent happenings around him to Li Jinfeng, but he did not mention the relationship between Huanxi mountain villa and Piaomiao sect. even though Li Jinfeng reside in Pingyang city, he was a scholar with little knowledge of the Jianghu matters so he assumed that the Huanxi mountain villa was a large private estate. When he heard that Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu were waiting for them outside the carriage for a long time, his ears turned red and he felt guilty. On that night, he was pulled by Shangguan Yun to another residence where they first had a meal before drinking some wine, and by the time he woke up the next day, it was already three poles after morning and the promise he made to the brothers were long thrown up into the clouds. Had Zhang Xiaohua not mentioned it again, he would have long forgotten the promise he made by thumping on his chest.

Li Jinfeng was an educated scholar after all, so he apologized sincerely, "Little brother Xiaohua, I had indeed forgotten about that matter on that day and made the two of you wait for naught. I am really sorry, so I will apologize to you right now."

Li Jinfeng bowed down immediately after his apology, and Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly supported him to recover as he said, "Elder brother Li, please don't be like this. The Lotus escort was easy to find anyway, we found it by casually asking around."

Li Jinfeng continued to ask, "Little brother Xiaohua, where are you heading to now? Are you going to the Lotus escort?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and asked, "Elder brother Li is so intelligent, how did you managed to guess? I am indeed going to the escort station."

Li Jinfeng smiled as he replied, "I heard that you were living in a mountain villa outside the city and had entered the city during all this time, so I naturally assumed that you are going to the escort station to find your elder brother. That

was not hard to guess at all.”

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and said, “Listening to elder brother Li’s analysis, I guess that it was really obvious. Little brother has the tendency to not use his head, so I am unable to see through the simplest things sometimes.”

Li Jinfeng patted his head and said, “You are still young so it is the right time to start using your head more. If you meet an obstacle, try to solve it on your own before asking for help from other people. Even if the answer someone else gave you is correct, it may not be suited for you. You have to decide on answer that is most suitable for you.”

Upon listening to his advice, Zhang Xiaohua felt a streak of electricity had run through his brain, and he seemed to have thought of something but was unable to recall what it was.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s confused expression, Li Jinfeng said, “It has been a long time since I went to the escort station to visit Shangguan Yun and Yu Lun, so today will be a good time to go there with you to see them.”

Zhang Xiaohua said happily, “Really? Those two people are inside? Are they delivery hands as well?”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s joyful reaction, Li Jinfeng shook his head and said, “I do not know what they are doing in the escort station but they should be learning martial arts and not working there. Their families are quite well off, especially Shangguan Yun who seems to be quite rich, so I doubt they will work for the escort station.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned into a shade of red; Li Jinfeng had previously advised him to use his head more and he had forgotten about it so soon, and even suggested that someone else would become a delivery hand. They most probably were learning martial arts from fourth uncle Wen, sigh, he has to use his brain more and not say such stupid things. Silence is gold!

Zhang Xiaohua then replied, “Elder brother Li, I understand. Lotus escort has a martial arts school which will accept students who pay their fees, I believe that elder brother Shangguan and elder brother Yu are learning martial arts from there.”

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, "That should be the case, what they lack the most is definitely not money. Let's go and see them, I still owe your brother an apology. Oh right, what is your brother's name?"

Zhang Xiaohua swallowed his tongue and said, "My second elder brother is called Zhang Xiaohu."

Hence, the two chatted as they walked towards the escort station.

The escort station was near the city entrance, when Zhang Xiaohua took the carriage with Ma Jing to enter the city, they also went through the entrance and he escaped not long after they reached the city. If Zhang Xiaohua had not met Li Jinfeng, he would have already reached the escort station, and even though Li Jinfeng was a scholar whose footsteps were much slower than Zhang Xiaohua, they still reached the escort station soon after.

There were many people who were entering and leaving from the door of the escort station on that day. The crowd was lively and it seemed that their business was doing well, the two stone lions were still majestic looking as before although Zhang Xiaohua did not pay much attention to them anymore.

As Li Jinfeng walked up the steps, he cupped his fists towards the guards standing beside the door and said, "Excuse me, I came here to find Shangguan Yun who is learning martial arts from the station, may I please enter?"

The head guard smiled as he replied, "Oh, looking for gentleman Shangguan, may I know if this gentleman can make his way there himself? Today's business is slightly busier than usual so I am afraid I do not have the time to bring you there."

Li Jinfeng replied, "It is not my first visit so I am familiar with gentleman Shangguan's quarters, I can go there by myself."

After he finished his sentence, the guard motioned him with a polite gesture to enter and said, "This way please, gentleman."

Li Jinfeng turned his head around and wave to Zhang Xiaohua before bringing the latter along with him through the main entrance of the escort station.

Zhang Xiaohua was dressed in servants' clothes that day, so the guards treated him as Li Jinfeng's attendant and let cross the door in with a single glance.

There were quite a few people walking in the field in front of the entrance who seemed to be there for business reasons and not to learn martial arts. Zhang Xiaohua extinguished the thought of looking for his second brother immediately, he decided to wait and follow Li Jinfeng to meet Shangguan Yun before doing so. Even though Zhang Xiaohua was not a student there like them, but they might have met him before having lived under the same roof.

The previous time Zhang Xiaohua came over, he had only went as far as the rows of houses in the right but when he went again that day, they were all closed probably for rest. Li Jinfeng did not stop by these rooms, he continued to walk along the corridor and into another wide courtyard with a row of houses in the opposite end. The houses were quiet as well, and the courtyard had many large trees which made it cool and shady. After the courtyard as a long wall which led to two doors on the left and right; Lin Jinfeng did not hesitate and he walked straight towards the left door and into another long corridor, and the end of the corridor was a row of exquisite-looking houses. Li Jinfeng brought Zhang Xiaohua past a few of the houses, observed carefully for a while, walked to one and knocked softly on the door.

A moment later, a lazy and slightly hoarse voice sounded, “Who is it, what is the matter?”

Zhang Xiaohua’s heart jumped when he heard the voice, wasn’t it Yu Lun’s voice? Even though he had not talked much to the other party, Zhang Xiaohua could still recall his voice.

Indeed, Li Jinfeng answered, “Brother Yu, I am Li Jinfeng, and I came over to meet my two elder brothers.”

Before Li Jinfeng ended his sentence, another voice sounded out, “Oh, it is brother Jinfeng, quickly come in. It has been many days since you came, have your studies been busier?”

The voice had a touch of pride in his tone, and it was indeed Shangguan Yun who spoke.

Li Jinfeng pushed the door opened and entered, he smiled, “My studies are not too busy, but I have been preparing for some exams so I did not have too much idle time. Haven’t I come over to visit our two heroes now?”

Shangguan Yun and Yu Lun were sitting on chairs with some drowsiness in their expressions; it was evident that they had just woken from an afternoon nap. They stood up and nodded their heads in approval when Li Jinfeng entered before returning to their seats, probably because they were all already very close to each other.

“Haha, brother Li is too courteous, calling us heroes. While brother Shangguan can be considered one, my own martial arts are like a three-legged cat so I don’t deserve such praise.” Yu Lun humbly said.

Shanguang Yun said, “Yu Lun has also improved recently, as long as he works harder, there will come the day when you succeed, there is no need to despair.”

After the two people finished their sentence, Li Jinfeng said, “I have brought a familiar face with me today, can you guess who it is?”

“Familiar face? Someone we both know?” The two men exchanged gazes in surprise.

Li Jinfeng smiled and called out, “Zhang Xiaohua, you can come in.”

Zhang Xiaohua then entered the room with a smile on his face and he greeted the two men, “I have met two brothers before more than a month ago.”

The two men were puzzled when they saw the azure robed youth with a little hat bowed towards them, who did Li Jinfeng brought with him this time?

After a careful inspection, they finally understood that the other party was the youth who sat on the same carriage with them to Pingyang city, only his clothes were swapped out with a servant uniform.

When Shangguan saw Zhang Xiaohua bowed, he did not stand up and simply nodded his head which could be considered as a greeting, while Yu Lun did not greet the latter and walked up to the front instead. He said, “Zhang Xiaohua, we are fellow passengers, how did you end up as brother Li’s servant?”

Upon hearing the misunderstanding, Li Jinfeng quickly explained, “It is not like this, how can I afford a servant if I can’t even take care of myself? This little brother Xiaohua is working in Huanxi mountain villa now.”

“Huanxi mountain villa?” Shangguan Yun raised his eyebrows when he heard

the name, he said, “That is a pretty good place so he should be treated quite well. Zhang Xiaohua, you have been quite lucky to find such a good place in Pingyang city.”

Yu Lun asked, “Is Huanxi mountain villa famous?”

Shangguan Yun looked at the other man and said, “Huanxi mountain villa is a business of Piaomiao sect, it is under Piaomiao sect’s management just like this Lotus escort.”

Yu Lun then understood and asked Zhang Xiaohua again, “Oh right, Zhang Xiaohua, didn’t you want to come with us to the Lotus escort? How did you end up in Huanxi mountain villa?”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned red as he replied, “About this, we initially wanted to learn martial arts here, but the people in the station said that we had to pay school fees. We did not have the money so...”

Even before Zhang Xiaohua could finish his sentence, Yu Lun laughed and said, “Which is why when you were asking by the Lotus escort, I was puzzled on why you wanted to come. I did not think that you wanted to learn martial arts, and if I had asked you another question at that time, it would have saved you the trip of coming here, doesn’t the poor pursues literature and the rich learns martial arts, how can you learn martial arts without money? Martial art is not something people like you can aspire to learn, just be a good servant now and earn enough money to increase the size of your fields, grow up a little more and find a bride, and happily live your life together with her.”

Chapter 93: Discussion

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Discussion

These words of Yu Lun were not incorrect even though it may sound impolite. Lin Jinfeng was slightly hurt when he saw Zhang Xiaohua's reddening face, even though he was a child from the village with little knowledge of the world, he had chased away the thief for him after all, and on the way to the Lotus escort, the boy's manner and words were smart and magnanimous which gave Li Jinfeng a good impression of him. Hence, he said, "Brother Yu, your words are too harsh. Little brother Xiaohua's dedication towards martial arts is a good thing, if a person with such passion learns martial arts, he would be able to help many people who suffered injustice in the streets."

Despite listening to Li Jinfeng's intervention, Yu Lun did not stop there and continued, "Brother Li pursues literature so he does not know how difficult the path to learn martial arts is. It is impossible to pick up anything without money or aptitude, and if something bad happens along the way, his life would be wasted for nothing. Don't you agree brother Shangguan?"

Shangguan Yun simply nodded without saying much or looking at Zhang Xiaohua.

Li Jinfeng felt that it was strange and he cast aside Zhang Xiaohua's matter. Instead, he walked forward and asked Shangguan Yun in curiosity, "Brother Shangguan, what is the reason for so? Little brother is curious, can you explain it to me?"

Shangguan Yun wrinkled his brows and answered, "Simply put, brother Li, you only need a few coins to buy books and read them when pursuing literature. At the very most, you can spend slightly more money to hire a teacher to reach you

the words, and these teachers can be found everywhere on the streets. Learning martial arts is different, take me for example. I always had an interest towards martial arts since young, and my family is wealthy enough so my father could invite an instructor to teach me, while even spending golds to purchase some precious herbs for me to bathe in. Martial arts masters are rare, and those with patience are even more so, I had switched my instructor many times before settling on one with genuine ability and only then did I pick up a few things. However, the instructor was not young anymore and he wanted to retire, my father did not want me to continue pursuing martial arts so I had to run away secretly to come here. With my foundation from childhood and the significant amount of school fees, I managed to enter this school but with someone like Zhang Xiaohua's background, how could he possibly learn martial arts?"

After finishing his explanation, Shangguan Yun shook his head and laughed gently. His laugh was not contemptuous, it was a small kind of laughter as if he was talking about the large ambitions of an insignificant servant.

His words had no malice in them, it was just a simple and honest evaluation, the kind that was as insignificant as waving one's hands or sweeping the dust off one's shoulders.

Yu Lun smiled knowingly as he looked at Zhang Xiaohua with contempt.

Li Jinfeng also felt the mood but he knew that Shangguan Yun's family so really wealthy that people like Zhang Xiaohua could not even be compared to a subordinate of his. To explain so much was already a form of respect, if it was another rich man's son who was asked the same question, he would have added some harmful words towards Zhang Xiaohua. However, this made Li Jinfeng realize the difference between him and Shangguan Yun, he was a poor scholar himself who had only met Shangguan Yun from a twist of fate, felt that he had good character so they formed a friendship. Now that he saw Shangguan Yun's attitude he wondered if their friendship was wise or not.

When Zhang Xiaohua heard these words, he naturally felt some distress but having received so many setbacks of his own, and remembering that he had already taken the first step towards learning martial arts, he told himself to persevere and the day where he could succeed would come eventually. His heart relaxed and he replied smilingly, "Gentleman Shangguan words are accurate,

and every sentence is well-meant, but there are many roads to learning martial arts, and not everyone has to necessarily follow a single route.”

Shangguan Yun who had not put Zhang Xiaohua in his eyes thought that the latter was keeping quiet because he felt ashamed or apologetic, but when he heard those words of his, he thought as if the boy had suddenly grown up, and could not help but spare him another glance and asked, “Oh? There are other roads, why don’t you tell me about them?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, “My second brother Zhang Xiaohu is working as a delivery hand in the Lotus escort now, and he is also learning martial arts.”

Yu Lun and Li Jinfeng thought that Zhang Xiaohua’s previous words were very insightful and they listened closely to his explanation, but upon hearing the three words “delivery hand”, Yu Lun could not help but break out into laughter, “Delivery hand, haha, delivery hand. A little delivery hand dares to compare itself to we who are learning martial arts here, it’s so funny that my stomach hurts.”

Shangguan Yun wanted to laugh as well, but he suddenly wrinkled his brow and said, “Zhang Xiaohu, Zhang Xiaohu, why does this name sound so familiar?”

When Yu Lun heard his words, he controlled his laughter and said, “A delivery hand named Zhang Xiaohua, how is that familiar to us, hahaha ~Zhang Xiaohua, that actually sounds familiar, as if I have heard that name somewhere before?”

Suddenly, Shangguan Yun slapped his chair and said, “Now I remember, I had heard fourth uncle Wen from the martial arts school division mentioned that this Zhang Xiaohua is a natural talent in martial arts, as well as a newly recruited delivery hand. I think he even said that he wanted to let him join our lessons.”

At that moment, a clear laugh echoed from outside, “What genius, he is just a mud bag who dares to call himself a genius after learning martial arts for a few days. If I have the opportunity, I will go over and teach him what a real genius is.”

Weren’t these words were too arrogant?

Zhang Xiaohua turned his head towards the door and looked expectantly to see who the speaker was.

Li Jinfeng had the same intention, someone who could say these words must have some real ability of his own. Scholars who pursue literature all had slim figures like jade trees, but what about martial artists? Wouldn't they all be thick and muscular men?

Hence, Li Jinfeng was full of expectations.

When Yu Lun heard these words, he quickly went to the door with a smile on his face.

Shangguan Yun wrinkled his brows and stood up immediately, but he did not walk to the door to welcome the new visitor.

The door was not closed so the person entered before Yu Lun could reach the door.

The person had a countenance that was like jade, and he carried a fan like Li Jinfeng although the fan was currently closed and he was playing with it in his hands. The person was also dressed in white robes, and seemed to be very particular about his appearance, he had many small things worn over his body although Zhang Xiaohua could not guess what they were for, the boy only thought that they looked troublesome and it would be difficult to work in the fields dressed like that.

The person was also quite handsome, but his brows were slightly too high which gave off a feeling of superiority. However, it matched his facial features, and it would not be too far-off to describe his looks as "suave and handsome, commanding and forceful".

Zhang Xiaohua turned his head back to look at Li Jinfeng and asked secretly, "This is also a person who practices martial arts? Why does he look more like a scholar than elder brother Li?"

Yu Lun was quick and responsive, he immediately curtsied, "Gentleman Yu has arrived, such a rare guest, I had not expected your arrival."

The gentleman Yu did not return the greeting as he waved his fan and said, "I have indeed went back home for a while, and came here today to pay a visit to gentleman Shangguan. Oh, who is this?"

He was obviously referring to Li Jinfeng who was in the same room. Yu Lun

smiled as he introduced the stranger, “This is flowing sand school’s gentleman Li, who is the scholar gentleman Shangguan and this humble person met on our journey to Pingyang city.”

When gentleman Yu heard that Li Jinfeng was a scholar, he cupped his fists and said, “This person is Yu Deyi, I am pleased to be your acquaintance.”

Li Jinfeng immediately returned Yu Deyi’s greeting, “It is my pleasure as well.”

Yu Lun who was at a side did not waste this opportunity and he said, “Gentleman Yu came from Yu city to learn the arts, his family is very influential in Yu city.”

Yu Deyi raised a finger to his mouth and said, “Shh... be more covert.”

He directly ignored Zhang Xiaohua and walked over to Shangguan Yun’s front and greeted, “Brother Shangguan, it has been a while but you look the same.”

Shangguan Yun smiled and returned the greeting, “Brother Yu has looked more vibrant since he came back, I cannot compare. Please take a seat.”

Yu Deyi did not stand on the ceremony and he immediately sat on the chair Yu Lun was previously sitting on. Shangguan Yun also reclaimed his seat.

The house Shangguan Yun and Yu Lun shared had two rooms, the inner room was naturally the place for the two men to sleep and the other room was a place to receive visitors. There were only two chairs and a table in this outer room , and when Li Jinfeng entered, they were too preoccupied with the conversation to offer him a seat. Since Shangguan Yun and Yun Deyi had sat down, the three other men had no chairs left for them. Yu Lun slapped his forehead, walked into the inner room and brought two chairs out. He sat on one of them and signaled Li Jinfeng to the other.

When Li Jinfeng saw that there was only one remaining chair, he felt uncomfortable that the other men were treating Zhang Xiaohua as though he was transparent. The latter was someone he had brought along personally, and even though the boy was only a servant, he was not his servant so he guessed that Yu Deyi must have misunderstood their relationship. However, he could not explain the situation without embarrassing Zhang Xiaohua, and yet he knew that there were only four chairs in the room which were all brought out so Yu Lun

was not making things difficult for Zhang Xiaohua on purpose. Thus, he was stuck in a dilemma of how to react in this situation.

Knowing the former's difficulty, Zhang Xiaohua walked to Li Jinfeng's back and patted his shoulder to nudge him towards the seat. He then walked to the back of the seat and stood with his hands at his back.

Li Jinfeng caught the message and he nodded smilingly before sitting down.

The actions of the two were not missed by the other three in the room; Shangguan Yun knew that there were only four chairs so he did not mind Zhang Xiaohua standing up. However, Yu Deyi was puzzled as he wondered, what was the meaning of this servant's behavior?

No matter what, it was none of his business so he did not investigate any further. Instead, he coughed slightly and asked, "I have heard from outside that you were mentioning a delivery hand with some good reputation, can you explain the situation in detail to me? I do not recall having heard this name before I left, so why is there already a commotion about him after a few days of my absence?"

Yu Lun gave Zhang Xiaohua a glance and explained, "Young master Yu, the person is called Zhang Xiaohu. The story was actually very straightforward, Zhang Xiaohu came at the same time with us to Pingyang city, and we even shared the same carriage. However, we did not enter the Lotus escort on the same day, we entered the martial arts school division like young master Yu but Zhang Xiaohu was unable to afford the school fees so he applied for the position of a delivery hand instead. I heard that sixth master Li was present during his recruitment test, and even though Zhang Xiaohua had never trained in martial arts for a day in his life before, he could perform the entire set of the sixth fist after watching a demonstration only once. This led sixth master Li to be surprised and gave the latter endless praises."

Upon listening up to here, Yu Deyi shook his head with a frown on his face and said, "Even though the sixth fist is quite complex and there may be difficulties replicating the entire set of movements, I but when I first started learning martial arts in my youth, which martial art did I fail to replicated after one demonstration? I even remembered that a cousin of mine also learnt the sixth

fist as his first martial art, and even though he did not replicate the whole set of movements, he managed to remember most of it. Zhang Xiaohu's talent may be good, but it will be too far-fetched to call him a genius."

Upon hearing the other party's judgement, Zhang Xiaohua was naturally unhappy. Even though this Yu Deyi has reasons for his own arrogance, the person he was talking about was still his own elder brother. Nevertheless, he knew that it would be difficult to hear praises of his brother, and he guessed that the other party might be feeling jealous as well.

Shangguan Yun picked up from where Yu Lun left off, "Brother Yu, your words are reasonable, I was not present on the day of the test so I did feel a little strange. However, if this was just the story, then it would be not be unordinary. There is still a little something that brother Yu is unaware of."

Yu Deyu was surprised and he said, "Will brother Shangguan enlighten me?"

Shangguan Yun continued to explain, "When Zhang Xiaohua entered the escort station as a delivery hand, I had not reached the martial arts school division yet, but wasn't brother Yu already here then? Furthermore, during the period before brother Yu returned to Yu city, wasn't Zhang Xiaohua already in the escort station then? Why would you have not heard of his name all these while?"

Yu Deyi answered casually, "He is only a small delivery hand, how would I know him? We do not learn martial arts together, and you can't expect me to run over to where he is to meet him."

Shangguan Yun smiled and said, "Brother Yu's words are reasonable. Actually, Zhang Xiaohu's name did not spread when brother Yu was around, but only more recently."

At that moment, Shangguan Yun also threw Zhang Xiaohua a glance as he said, "According to some of our brothers in the martial arts hall, ever since Zhang Xiaohua entered the station, apart from the normal basic training, the latter only continued to practice the sixth stance. Even the instructor felt that it was strange, and sixth master Li already commented that his mastery was very good and offered to teach him new martial arts, he refused and said that he could still improve after each practice, and would only consider other martial arts after he

stopped improving. Sixth master Li thought that he was joking but after more than ten days later, Zhang Xiaohua was still practicing the sixth stance which made sixth master Li exasperated because he did not want to give up on such a good sprout. Finally, they made a gamble, if Zhang Xiaohua could defeat a bodyguard, he would be allowed to continue his own training. If not, he would have to listen to sixth master Li's instructions. Brother Yu, can you guess what happened in the end?"

Yu Deyi slapped his head and said, "Is brother Shangguan insulting my intelligence? If Zhang Xiaohu had lost the match, why would we still be discussing about him today?"

Shangguan Yun laughed and said, "Haha, true. Sixth master Li did not expect him to win on that day. No matter how you think about it, the bodyguards in Lotus escort are all experienced martial artists, which had not trained for at least a few years? Five to six years aren't even worth mentioning, most have more than ten years of experience, so how could this Zhang Xiaohu who trained for a month be a match for them?"

Yu Lun noticed that Shangguan Yun had missed out some parts of the story so he added, "I was not too sure myself but I heard that Zhang Xiaohu was initially getting beaten up by the bodyguard. However, he continued to use the sixth fist and the more they fought, the better he got and even when the bodyguard switched to different martial arts, they were useless and he was finally hit squarely on his chest and forced to admit defeat."

"Oh~ This Zhang Xiaohu is quite interesting. Perhaps he could really be a genius?" Yu Deyi became excited as he said, "However, it does sound exaggerated for a person who have trained for only a month to beat an opponent with more than a decade of experience. What could possibly be the reason?"

At that moment, a voice came from behind, "Practice makes perfect."

Everyone turned over and it was Zhang Xiaohua who answered brightly.

Ever since Shangguan Yun mentioned that his second brother Zhang Xiaohu only trained in a single martial art, a chord struck in his heart just like how when he was talking to Li Jinfeng in the morning and the latter said that other people

have their own answers, and their answers might not be suited for him. This tied in his second brother's situation when learning martial arts, and he felt as though he found a way to break through his "bottleneck". When he heard Yu Deyi's question, an itch appeared in his heart and he repeated the line teacher Liu had shared previously with him.

Yu Deyi wrinkled his brow and snorted before saying, "Gentleman Li, why is your servant so lacking in decorum, has your household failed to teach him properly?"

Li Jinfeng's face turned red, weren't the words insulting his upbringing? He immediately stood up and explained, "Brother Yu is mistaken, he is not my attendant, but a servant who works in Huanxi mountain villa. It can be put that he is a common friend of brother Shangguan, brother Yu and me."

"Friend?" Yu Deyi studied the azure robe and little hat that Zhang Xiaohua wore and he felt uncomfortable. He turned to Shangguan Yun who also had a frown on his face as he thought that Li Jinfeng was not tactful in his words, because a servant as a friend was naturally disgraceful and he had never treated Zhang Xiaohua as one. Yu Lun noticed the situation and hurriedly explained, "Young master Yu, we all took the same carriage to Pingyang city which is how we knew each other."

Yu Deyi then nodded his head arrogantly and retracted his gaze. However, he seemed to recall something and asked again, "You are all fellow passengers? Then didn't he come with Zhang Xiaohu as well?"

Yu Lun smiled as he replied, "The five of us did take the same carriage, and he is Zhang Xiaohua, the younger brother of the aforementioned Zhang Xiaohu."

Chapter 94: Inner energy

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Inner energy

“Zhang Xiaohua, Zhang Xiaohu? Haha~ interesting.” Yu Deyi laughed.

Zhang Xiaohua also smiled, but his smile was neither arrogant like Yu Deyi, nor prideful like Shangguan Yu, it also did not seek to fawn like Yu Lun, nor was it modest like Li Jinfeng. His smile was sincere and from the heart, perhaps because he was proud of his second brother, or because he was happy about the current situation.

Yu Deyi retracted his laughter and asked, “Can you explain the meaning of the words just now?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered calmly, “The meaning of the words is, there are no special forces at play, and it is only the results of practice. I have also practiced martial arts for a few days, and did not have any improvements at all. When I heard you talk about my second brother, I was suddenly enlightened that there are many ways to achieve success, as long as one is proficient in a good martial art, then it would have the same effect as knowing several martial arts. There is also another saying, a hundred branches are not as good as a fine one, wouldn't that also apply to this situation?”

While the others were dumbstruck, Li Jinfeng was roused to satisfaction as he praised, “Little brother Xiaohua, your explanation shows good understanding. The teacher in my school would also say that we are too greedy with knowledge, and it has the same reason as well. A person's ability is limited, reading a thousand books might not bring you as much benefit as reading a single book attentively. I used to not place any importance in this line of reasoning, but after listening to little brother Xiaohu's story, it seems I have to pay more heed to it.”

Yu Deyi pursed his lips and disagreed, he said, “You all do not train in martial arts so you won’t be able to understand, martial arts and books are two entirely different things. A person who only trained for a month could never gain victory over someone with many years of experience, perhaps the bodyguard made a slip up.”

Shangguan Yun said, “That was what sixth master Li thought as well, and even though he agreed to let Zhang Xiaohu stick to his decision, he still tried the test the boy out and went to find another two bodyguards the next day to exchange pointers with him. However, the result led everyone to be tongue-tied, even though Zhang Xiaohu did not achieve victory, the two bodyguards were also unable to gain the advantage over him. Hence, both matches ended in a tie.”

Yu Deyi lost his composure and stood up from his chair, he said, “That is impossible, I am familiar with the bodyguards in Lotus escort, there are many of them whose skills are unordinary and are comparable to those from the martial arts school division, how could they not beat this Zhang Xiaohu? It is impossible.”

Shangguan Yun waited for Yu Deyi to finish his rant before he said, “Young master Yu, you did not listen to the story carefully. They were competing in fist stances.”

“Oh~ exchanging pointers using fist stances, haha, I understand.” Yu Deyi slapped his forehead and sat down peacefully. He continued to say, “I actually lost my bearings. My master had already told me many times, how could I forget that they were competing in fist stances. In that case, if none of them used their inner energy, it is possible for the bodyguards to be forced into a tie. Nevertheless, even without using inner energy, I should be able to win over Zhang Xiaohu, isn’t he a mudbag who only just sprouted after all?” While Yu Deyi spoke with reason in the beginning, he began to show more of his colors the more he spoke.

When talking about the two words “inner energy”, Zhang Xiaohua and Li Jinfeng had confused expressions on their faces, while Yu Lun looked on enviously as he twiddled his pudgy fingers.

Li Jinfeng did not say anything as he looked at his conversation partners

quietly. However, Zhang Xiaohua could not let lose this opportunity to learn more about martial arts so he asked unabashedly, “Erm, about inner energy, what kind of thing is it?”

“What kind of thing is inner energy? Hahaha.” When Yu Deyi heard these words, he burst out into laughter, shook his head and looked out at the door without explaining anything.

Shangguan Yun also had an amused expression on his face but he still explained, “Zhang Xiaohua, what this inner energy is, I won’t be able to explain it to you clearly. When you finally find a teacher of your own, you can ask him the same question again.”

Seeing that they did not reply him, Zhang Xiaohua looked towards Yu Lun but the latter was also smiling while his eyes looked greedily at young master Yu. Since Zhang Xiaohua was transparent in his eyes, how could he answer the boy’s question?

“Sigh~”, Zhang Xiaohua sighed in his heart, but he was inspired soon after. Since you won’t tell me what it is, I can ask squad leader He later on. After all, he is an official disciple from Piaomiao sect, so he would be able to explain it to me.

Just as he was thinking about it, Yu Deyi retracted his gaze and focused it on Zhang Xiaohua, he said, “Zhang Xiaohua, I can tell you what inner energy is, but I have a condition.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he asked, “Condition, what condition?”

Yu Deyi smiled and said, “Simple, if you get your second brother to compete fist stances with me, I will explain what it is to you.”

Zhang Xiaohua immediately shook his head and said, “I cannot do so, I can’t represent my second brother to accept your request to spar. It has been a long time since I’ve met him as well.”

Yu Deyi teased, “I knew it, you would not dare to accept my challenge, you are just a coward from the village.”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head again and said, “This has nothing to do with courage. Maybe I am a coward, but I will not ‘back off from a million people’ and let my second brother get into a fight with someone else for such a ridiculous

reason. I may not know what inner energy is, but there are many people who do. Since it is not just a secret among all of you, I will naturally find out one day. Don't you agree, young master Yu?"

Yu Deyi was initially looking at Zhang Xiaohua jeeringly, but after listening to the latter's words, he straightened his face, whipped open his fan and said, "Zhang Xiaohua? What a surprise that you are able to think so thoroughly despite your young age. Are you really from the village?"

Zhang Xiaohua maintained his smile and said, "It is not important whether or not I came from the village, I only know that I should do things which I believe are right."

Yu Deyi nodded seriously and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, I retract the words I said to you earlier. Since you said that you will find out what it is sooner or later, I shall explain what inner energy is to you right now, so you can learn the difference between the village and the city."

After he finished his sentence, he stared at Zhang Xiaohua while waiting for the latter's reply. Zhang Xiaohua's innocent gaze met his eyes squarely and his expression was completely calm, as though he was saying, "Say if you want, I did not force you to it. I do not mind if you do not explain at all."

Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua did not reply him, Yu Deyi had no choice but to explain slowly, "Actually, this inner energy is too complex to explain in words. Since you have not trained in martial arts, I am not sure how to explain it to you. Put simply, if you can use inner energy, your body can produce a type of force which differs from the external force your body usually produce. This force can be trained and grow, and it will circulate around your body when you are not using it. Different martial arts will have different ways of using this force, and the destructive power you can release will also differ. If your second brother is only exchanging fist stances, then that would mean that he is not using this potent weapon. In a real fight, your brother will be weaponless when he does not possess inner energy, while the opponent will be holding a long sharp sword. Therefore, your second brother would definitely lose, do you understand now?"

These words by Yu Deyi were said to stun Zhang Xiaohua, but it also gave him a valuable lesson on martial arts. Zhang Xiaohua would have never imagined

learning martial arts to be so complex, and had thought that it was simply about practicing those fist movements, but now it seemed that he has yet to learn any inner energy cultivation moves yet.

After listening to Yu Deyi's explanation, Zhang Xiaohua asked, "Is there any inner energy application in Rohan fist? Where can I find the cultivation method to learn this inner energy?"

"Dang" Yu Deyi collapsed onto the floor from his chair. Yu Lun hurriedly supported the former up again while carefully dusting his clothes, and he smiled fawningly, "Young master Yu, be careful. There is no need to get too surprised while talking to this servant."

Yu Deyi carefully sat on his chair and used his fingers to grip a firm holding, he threw his fan on the table and said gravely, "This Zhang Xiaohua is no ordinary person, the questions he ask are so startling and vulgar that it has expanded my horizons, I have to be careful when speaking to him."

He then turned to Zhang Xiaohua and said, "This little brother, how can you ask such a question, it is so obvious that you are an idiot who has not learnt any martial arts before! Everyone knows that this Rohan fist originated from Dalin temple and is now widespread across the Jianghu, its position in the Jianghu is like just like the surname Zhang among the general population, this staple martial art is as common as cabbage, how can it be accompanied by profound inner energy usage? Do you know what inner energy is? Only the top practitioners in Jianghu will have the chance to learn it, it is like a pearl on the crown. The different types of inner energy cultivation methods are carefully guarded and passed down over time by the different sects and only core disciples are given access to learn them. You will have to be dreaming if you think you can learn any inner energy cultivation method. Furthermore, even if you found an inner energy cultivation method, you may not able to learn it."

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned like a wooden chicken, he asked, "Why?"

Yu Deyi replied smugly, "There are thousands of thousands of thousands of people in the world, and everyone's aptitude is different. Even if every single one of them is given access to this inner energy cultivation method, those that can practice it and produce inner energy are only a rare few. Think about it, if this

inner energy can be easily trained, inner energy cultivation methods won't be so rare anymore."

Li Jinfeng who was at a side was also dumfounded and he interrupted, "If young master Yu had not explain, I would not have known. Learning martial arts is so profound, everyone's aptitude is different, and the opportunities they cross also differ. Three thousand water sprouts but I can only scoop one, enough, I will just continue to pursue the literature with a book in one hand as I travel with the mundane masses."

Zhang Xiaohua was being swept off his feet by Yu Deyi's words, but the phrase, "Three thousand water sprouts but I can only scoop one" woke him up, he has not even completed learning the martial arts he was taught, so this matter of inner energy could be left for much later."

Yu Lun also added from the side, "Young master Yu's words are marvelous, I just do not have the fate to encounter such a pearl which is why I cast my lot with the Lotus escort. If I am still unable to find my fate here, I would have to impose on young master Yu in the future."

Yu Deyi looked at Yu Lun without answering him, what a joke, this inner energy cultivation method was an important treasure, why would anyone let an outsider look at it? However, this Lotus escort did have some shallow cultivation methods for students with potential to learn from, he could still consider referring the latter to these techniques. Thus, Yu Deyi nodded his head slowly as he faced Yu Lun's smile.

When Yu Lun saw Yu Deyi gave a sign of approval, he burst with joy and immediately grabbed the fan on the table, opened it carefully and fanned Yu Deyi, which secretly gained him the disapproval from Shangguan Yun.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua spoke up again, "Young master Yu, since you have explained the matter of inner energy to me, that how about I represent my second brother to accept your challenge for an exchange in fist martial arts?"

Yu Deyi was surprised as he asked, "Zhang Xiaohua, what do you mean? While discussing with you earlier, you refused my request but now that I dropped the matter, you turn around to accept it, why so?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled mysteriously and said, "Since my second brother has

learnt the same martial art since his first day, he must have reached some achievement in it, and to be able to hold his own against the other bodyguards would mean that it is too easy for him. Since you have kindly offered to instruct him in the fist martial arts, why would I obstruct you if he wished the same as well?"

"Hahaha," Yu Deyi laughed and said, "Not bad, I guess that Zhang Xiaohu must be excited if he learnt that I wanted to challenge him. Alright, let's go find you. You can lead the way."

After a moment later, Zhang Xiaohua still remained in his position. Yun Deyi wrinkled his brow and asked, "What's wrong? You don't dare to again?"

Zhang Xiaohua sheepishly answered, "This is only my second time in Lotus escort, how would I know where my second brother is?" His face was full of innocence as he replied.

Yu Lun hurriedly offered, "I know where he is, I shall bring everyone there now."

After he said his sentence, Yu Lun returned the fan to Yu Deyi and motioned the latter to step to the front. Yu Deyi did not stand on the ceremony, he opened his fan with gusto and stepped out of the room suavely. Zhang Xiaohua thought to himself, "If we are comparing flashiness, my second brother will not be your match."

The place for the delivery hands were not in the courtyard they were at, Zhang Xiaohua followed the party and passed by two courtyards before reaching their destination. The courtyard for delivery hands was evidently simpler looking, it seemed that there was a large difference between free and paid accommodation.

Zhang Xiaohu was pretty well-known then, when the party said that they were looking for him, the people in courtyard could immediately point out the right room and bring them there. The door of the room was closed, so Zhang Xiaohua knocked gently on the door and heard a familiar voice in response, "Who is it?"

Zhang Xiaohua could not wait and longer and he opened the door while calling, "Second brother." He then rushed into the room which was quite spacious. Zhang Xiaohu was in a horse stance with his two hands forming circles as though

he was in the middle of training when he heard Zhang Xiaohua's voice and then saw him enter the room. He recovered his posture and shouted happily, "Xiaohua, haha, it's you. I have missed you to death."

After finishing his sentence, he lunged over and hugged Zhang Xiaohua. After all, the two brothers have not met for more than a month, and Zhang Xiaohua's visit was also unexpected. When he relaxed his embrace, he noticed that Zhang Xiaohua's face seemed to have grown chubbier and he felt more relaxed. If his brother became skinnier, Zhang Xiaohu would be tormented by his guilt.

Seeing the two brothers ended their affection, Li Jinfeng stepped forward and greeted, "Zhang Xiaohua, hello, do you still remember me?"

Zhang Xiaohu then noticed the people who had entered with Zhang Xiaohua, he smiled and said, "Of course I do, you were all in the same carriage as we two brothers when we came to Pingyang city, how would I forget? Except, this person is?"

Yu Deyi walked to the front and said, "I am Yu Deyi from the martial arts school division, and have admired brother Zhang's reputation for long."

"Martial arts school division?" Zhang Xiaohu felt strange, why was this person with Zhang Xiaohua?

Yu Lun hurriedly explained, "Zhang Xiaohu, this young master Yu, gentleman Ma and I are all learning martial arts here in the martial arts school division. After being here all these time, we only recently learnt that you were also here as well, so we came over to meet you. I apologize for our late visit."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled as he said, "I see, so we are all brothers from the escort station, please be at ease. I was also unaware that you all were in the martial arts school division or I would have looked for you. Come, please take a sit."

However, he turned embarrassed. Even though the room was rather spacious, there was only one chair in the corner, where could his visitors sit? Not possibly on his bed right?

Zhang Xiaohu scratched his head.

Yu Deyi said, "It is alright, I am not here to catch up. I came looking for brother Zhang to exchange some pointers, so I will wait outside instead."

After finishing his sentence, he turned around and walked out, while Shangguan Yun and Lu Yun cupped their fists before following suit.

Hence, only Li Jinfeng and Zhang Xiaohua, as well as a confused Zhang Xiaohu was left in the room.

Zhang Xiaohua's face was apologetic as he explained the earlier event before saying, "Second brother, was I right to do this? Am I making things difficult for you?"

Zhang Xiaohua patted Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders and said, "Xiaohua, you have grown up. You did well and I would have done the same if I were you. Practicing martial arts is all about pursuing progress, even if I lose, I will not lose my passion to improve, so I will definitely accept such a challenge. Furthermore, while examining this fist martial art for the past few days, I have learnt something new and was looking for someone to test it with, so the timing was opportune. Yu Deyi has come at the right time, haha, let's experience the martial arts from the martial arts school division."

After he finished his sentence, he held on to Zhang Xiaohua's hands and left the room together.

Yu Deyi and the rest were not outside the house, so they had probably gone ahead to the field.

When the three people reached the field, there were already quite a few people gathered there. It seemed that the news of Zhang Xiaohu and Yu Deyi's match had already spread, and even more people were continuing to join the crowd.

Zhang Xiaohu and the other two squeezed among the crowd as they said, "Excuse me, excuse me, I can't enter."

By the time Zhang Xiaohu squeezed to the center of the crowd, his back was already full of perspiration, Zhang Xiaohua felt a tinge of regret, learning martial arts can only help fight against a hundred people. Learning to control people's emotions is the true profound martial art, by using the crowd as a weapon, you can still claim victory even when faced with a hundred, or a thousand enemies. He only learnt this after seeing the embarrassment on his second brother's face.

Chapter 95: Contest

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Contest

There was a large space in the middle of the crowd, these spectators had seen such matches many times so they had left an appropriate space for the spar to take place. If they stood too far apart, they would not be able to spot the details, but if they stood too close, they would be susceptible to injury. Hence, the amount of space was the ideal size after many experiences of blood and tears.

Within the empty space, Yu Deyi was happily greeting the people he recognized and when Zhang Xiaohu entered, he immediately retracted his smile and put on a serious expression.

Zhang Xiaohu looked at the surroundings and said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, stand slightly further away. While fighting, I will not be able to look after you so you might get injured."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and replied, "Alright second brother, I will stand with the rests."

Yu Deyi and Zhang Xiaohu exchanged glances as they cupped their fists in unison and said, "Please."

The two then adjusted their posture to the same opening stance.

Zhang Xiaohua has learnt the sixth fist before although he only remembered a few stances, he found their stances familiar. His heart shuddered as he thought, could Yu Deyi be using the sixth fist as well to counter Zhang Xiaohu?

Zhang Xiaohua was proven right when the fight began, the arrogant Yu Deyi wanted to prove his superiority in the fight by using his own sixth fist stance to place victory over Zhang Xiaohu's sixth fist stance, and thus, the movements

both used looked similar to each other, and it looked more like a performance than a fight to the spectators.

The spectators were dazzled and yelling out praises, there was even someone who said, "These two's performance is really good, it looked like they have trained together for many years."

These words which sounded like praises were attacks to Yu Deyi's pride. Zhang Xiaohu had trained for slightly more than a month so it would be praise to him, but Yu Deyi had submerged himself in martial arts for many years and to produce this kind of result with an opponent like Zhang Xiaohu was out of the former's expectation. Hence, he did not continue to treat his opponent lightly, and his punches and kicks increased in frequency and fell upon Zhang Xiaohu's body like the pitter patter of rain.

Since the tempo of his opponent had increased, Zhang Xiaohu was naturally unable to cope and would every so often reveal a weak spot. Fortunately, he was familiar with this martial art and was able to defend against Yu Deyi's attacks while improving his own understanding. Thus, Zhang Xiaohu was like a lotus leaf in the rain, he would be constantly pounded by the rain drops but would never submerge into the water.

Seeing that he had almost completed one cycle of the sixth fist stance but was still unable to bend Zhang Xiaohu down to his will, Yu Deyi eyes squinted, his left hand went up and right hand face the ground, while his legs switched their position. Yu Deyi had given up using the sixth fist, and had changed his stance to the eight trigram palm as his body swam around Zhang Xiaohu's body. However, Zhang Xiaohu was not to be taken lightly, seeing that his opponent had changed his stance, he maintained his horse stance and continued to use the sixth fist to defend against Yu Deyi's attack.

Zhang Xiaohua had not seen the eight trigrams fist before so he was initially worried for his brother. However, seeing Zhang Xiaohu's unchanged composure as he maintained his defense, Zhang Xiaohua became partially relieved. After a short while, Zhang Xiaohu actually turned the tides around and began to attack whenever an opportunity arises while maintaining his air-tight defense. Zhang Xiaohua then turned his attention onto the eight trigrams fist to study this new martial art.

Unfortunately, after seeing it for quite some time, Yu Deyi switched to another stance again and Zhang Xiaohua still could not remember any of the stances from the eight trigrams fist. He felt even more depressed, it seemed that his aptitude was not just ordinarily poor, fortunately Yu Lun who was at a side did not know his thoughts or the latter would laughed at him being a country bumpkin, and said how could martial arts be so easily trained? If not, who would dare to display his martial arts while fighting with another opponent while risking the other party to steal his moves?

While Zhang Xiaohua was still feeling depressed, Yu Deyi had already switched into several more martial arts but they were unable to pose any danger to Zhang Xiaohu. Hence, he rolled his eyes and hardened his heart, then pretended to leave an opening. Zhang Xiaohu seemed not to notice the trap the other party set up and he used his right fist to punch towards Yu Deyi's left rib. Seeing the oncoming punch, Yu Deyi became excited and his left hand caught Zhang Xiaohu's wrist while his right hand grabbed onto his shirt. Upon seeing the change of events, Zhang Xiaohua almost shouted out, was this not the deflection move little second Nie used on him? Zhang Xiaohu clenched his fists as he watched on worriedly.

When Zhang Xiaohu's wrist was caught and shirt was grabbed, he naturally knew that he had to avoid being caught. Thus, his left fist turned into a palm and it pushed towards Yu Deyi's right hand, and when the latter noticed the counter, he changed his claw into a fist to defend against Zhang Xiaohu's palm. Yu Deyi's left hand continued its attack with even greater force and when it reached his target, Zhang Xiaohu was blown back and fell towards the ground.

Seeing his second brother having experienced the same setback, Zhang Xiaohu involuntarily cried out but before his voice could reached his brother, the situation changed. Zhang Xiaohu's body flipped in mid-air and changed its direction towards Yu Deyi, and even returned some of the momentum back as he kicked towards Yu Deyi's shoulder.

Yu Deyi quickly used his hands to defend but he failed and was kicked several steps back.

Upon seeing the exciting scene, the audience cried out in praise and when it reached Yu Deyi's ears, he grew even more irritated as if a needle had poked his

temper. Yu Deyi's left leg pushed off the ground as he activated his qinggong and appeared beside Zhang Xiaohu who just landed from the air, took a deep breath and pulled energy from his dantian into his palm. The palm turned from its original white color into a light shade of purple as it thrust towards Zhang Xiaohu. Upon seeing the light shade of purple, Shangguan Yun's face turned as he shouted out, "Purple sand palm?!" It appeared that Yu Deyi had used his inner energy in a moment of distress.

When Zhang Xiaohua heard the three words "Purple sand palm", he had a bad premonition and quickly rushed into the ring despite not knowing what he could do.

Zhang Xiaohu was already surprised when he saw the palm closing onto him just as he landed onto the ground, and upon noticing the irregularity in color, he did not dare to use his own arms to receive the palm thrust and immediately used his feet to slide away. The purple colored palm did not hit its target squarely, but Zhang Xiaohu's arm did brush across Yu Deyi's arm. In front of an opponent who activated his inner energy, Zhang Xiaohu could still maintain his composure and he staggered in the direction of Zhang Xiaohua, but before Zhang Xiaohu could steady himself, Yu Deyi threw another palm thrust right in front of his eyes.

At that moment, Shangguan Yun shouted, "Yu Deyi, stop using the purple sand fist right now." While he also ran towards the fight.

When Yu Deyi heard Shangguan Yun's shout, his mind was cleared again, this was only an exchange of fist martial arts, and his opponent could not use inner energy and even only knew one type of fist martial art. If his purple sand palm had struck onto Zhang Xiaohu, the latter's would suffer serious injuries that could even lead to his death. Even though he wanted to stop himself, it was too late to pull back his attack, so... so what could he do then? The expression on Yu Deyi's face turned from one of smugness into worry.

Upon seeing that the purple colored palm was about to land on his chest while his own fists were still raised in the air, Zhang Xiaohu's mind became exceptionally calm as he looked on while waiting for the pain to arrive.

However, a small fist suddenly appeared before his eyes, yes, a small and white

fist appeared from below his left ribs and came up to block the attack so just as the purple colored palm was about to reach his own chest, it met the little fist head on.

The purple colored palm collided together with the small white fist.

Yu Deyi thought that he was in deep trouble but he did not expect this fist to appear right at the critical moment. He was joyful as he retracted seventy percent of his inner energy when his palm collided with the fist, and even though retracting one's inner energy could cause serious internal injuries to his meridians, he could not care less during that moment.

When the inner energy was returned into his meridians, Yu Deyi felt a great sense of relief and just as he was about to control the flow of inner energy in his body, the situation changed again. After thirty percent of Yu Deyi's inner energy was transmitted into the little fist, he heard continuous cracking sounds followed by a loud yelp of pain. The voice was high and it sounded like it was in terrible pain, and Yu Deyi realized that the voice was slightly familiar, and even though he could not recall the person, he still felt grateful towards him. Just as Yu Deyi thought that the situation was under control again, he felt a sharp pain in his palm, and it was not inner energy but pure physical force. Under this physical force, Yu Deyi was unable to maintain his balance and when he fell onto the floor, the remaining seventy percent of his inner energy flowed in the reverse direction through his meridians. Yu Deyi lost all the blood in his face as he tried to focus in the inner energy cultivation method and force the inner energy back to its normal flow.

Fortunately, the force was only pure physical force and not inner energy which could transmit itself into Yu Deyi's own meridians, so he did not suffer any serious injuries. After a short while later, he would be able to stand up again although there was still some damage done to his meridians. Before Yu Deyi could maintain his posture, he opened his mouth and spat out some fresh blood, apparently his organs had also suffered some damage.

The owner of the fist was in a worse situation. After the yelp, there was no more sound from him. Under the remaining inner energy from Yu Deyi, his body flew into the sky and formed a beautiful curved line before landing on the floor without any further movement.

Zhang Xiaohu could see the fist and palm when they came into contact, he could hear the cracking sounds of bones when they collided, and he also heard the familiar voice when it yelped in pain. His heart thumped, could it be Zhang Xiaohua? However, his own body has lost its stability and by the time he picked himself up from the ground after falling down, the small skinny body was sprawled on the ground at a distance from him, and it did not have any movement at all.

Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly got up and yelled, “Xiaohua” as he lunged over.

By the time he went over to Zhang Xiaohua’s side, Shangguan Yun had already ran over and picked the boy up without hesitation. He put his finger under Zhang Xiaohua’s nose before heaving a sigh of relief, then said to Zhang Xiaohu who was rushing over, “Zhang Xiaohu, it’s alright, Zhang Xiaohua has only fainted.”

Zhang Xiaohu was still not comforted and he carefully took Zhang Xiaohua’s body from Shangguan Yun, bent forward and placed his ear on Zhang Xiaohua’s body, and after personally hearing Zhang Xiaohua’s breathing, his heart slowly calmed down. As long as he was still alive, the other problems can be settled later on.

Zhang Xiaohu’s gaze fell on Zhang Xiaohua’s broken hand and his heart ached deeply. The hand was bleeding profusely and large bruises were swelling on it, the whole hand looked like a giant bun. Zhang Xiaohu turned his head hatefully towards the culprit who made Zhang Xiaohua end up in his predicament.

However, Zhang Xiaohu could not preserve his hatred.

When he turned to see Yu Deyi, the latter’s face was pale and yellow, a line of blood dribbled from the side of his mouth, and a blot of fresh bloodstain was on the front of his chest. Yu Deyi’s internal injuries were probably more severe than Zhang Xiaohua’s.

Within that moment, Zhang Xiaohu let go of his hatred, perhaps this was the bloodiness that comes with Jianghu. A simple friendly spar could lead to such injuries from a moment of slip-up, what if there was a fatal injury instead? Zhang Xiaohu’s heart shivered at the thought.

Yu Deyi walked over to Zhang Xiaohu and looked at Zhang Xiaohua, the former’s heart was fully of guilt and regret as he said to Zhang Xiaohu, “Brother

Zhang, I have lost in this match. Sigh, I am really sorry, I was caught up in the moment and forgot that this was a friendly spar and used inner energy in my strikes. I will be accountable for all of your losses, all of the responsibilities of Zhang Xiaohua's injuries will be borne by me, so please relax."

Zhang Xiaohu looked at the opposite party who was sincere in making amends, he did not know whether to laugh or cry, and he said, "Young master Yu, let's not talk about the victor or loser in this match, please find a physician for Zhang Xiaohua immediately, treating his injuries is the top priority. Since your own injuries are not light either, I suggest that you consult a physician as well."

Shangguan Yun who was standing at a side said, "These two brothers should calm down first, Zhang Xiaohua's injuries are severe so we should avoid moving him, and young master Yu should also sit down to recuperate. I have already instructed Yu Lun to find a physician from the west martial arts hall, and they will come here soon."

At that moment, the spectators who were watching the match had all disperse, leaving behind a few concerned people who stayed behind to see if they could help in any way.

The physician had not arrived, and a voice sounded, "Yu Deyi, why have you caused trouble again? Did you injure Zhang Xiaohu this time?"

When Yu Deyi heard these words, he stood up timidly like a mouse and answered honestly, "Uncle Song, you have arrived." His honest looking expression was just like a new student who met a teacher in school, there was no trace of arrogance and anyone who seen him would praise his obedience.

Everyone turned around to look, and it was Lotus escort's third master Qu. From his anxious and angry appearance, he must have ran over immediately upon noticing the trouble.

When third master Qu got nearer, he looked at Yu Deyi and immediately frowned, saying, "Why do you have internal injuries? Weren't you exchanging fist stances with Zhang Xiaohu?"

He then looked at Zhang Xiaohu who was standing behind Yu Deyi and asked, "Zhang Xiaohu is not injured? What has happened?"

Yu Deyi quickly moved aside to reveal the unconscious Zhang Xiaohua and said sheepishly, “Uncle Song, you should look at Zhang Xiaohua first.”

When third master Qu saw Zhang Xiaohua’s appearance, he flew into a rage and yelled, “Yu Deyi! You dare to use purple sand fist!”

He then pushed Yu Deyi aside and grabbed Zhang Xiaohua’s hands to feel the latter’s pulse, he said, “Furthermore, you used it on a small innocent boy like him, how could your heart be so evil, why have I not seen it before? Were you trying to kill this boy?”

Yu Deyi lowered his head and traces of embarrassment appeared on his pale face.

After third master Qu used his inner energy to inspect Zhang Xiaohua, he heaved a sigh of relief and said warmly to Zhang Xiaohu, “This boy is fine, he just fainted and will wake up later.”

He then raise Zhang Xiaohua’s injured hand and inspected it carefully, even bringing it up to his nose to sniff before sighing again and asked, “Zhang Xiaohu, who is this child?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied respectfully, “Third master Qu, this is my younger brother Zhang Xiaohua, he was with me when I passed the test to become a delivery hand a month ago, haven’t you seen him then too?”

When he heard Zhang Xiaohu’s reply, he glanced at Zhang Xiaohua and sighed again, saying, “Now that I remember, wasn’t he the boy who lifted that five hundred jin weight? Didn’t he go to Huanxi mountain villa with Qiu Tong, why is he here again?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “Xiaohua is orking in the mountain villa, but he came down today to the escort station to visit me for the first time when something like this happened. Oh right, third master Qu, how are my younger brother’s injuries?”

Third master Qu said, “As for Zhang Xiaohua’s injuries, we can wait for a physician to diagnose him properly. However, Zhang Xiaohu, you must make some mental preparation, when I saw, how to say this, Zhang Xiaohua’s hand seemed to be completely cripples. The bones in his right hand have been

completely shattered, and even the rarest medicine may not heal his injuries completely. If it is treated well, perhaps he can still move his hand and it won't affect his life too much. However, working in Huanxi mountain villa will be impossible, and all other types of hard labor will not be possible as well. Come over, Yu Deyi."

Yu Deyi lowered his head as he walked over. Third master Qu said, "Yu Deyi, you should be aware of Zhang Xiaohua's injuries, there will be problems for the rest of his life which you must properly compensate for to at least make sure he won't starve of having nothing to wear."

Yu Deyi did not dare to say otherwise and agreed immediately, "Uncle Song, don't worry. I promise that I will do at least this so that Zhang Xiaohua would still be able to live on comfortably in the future."

Chapter 96: Dealing with injuries

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Dealing with injuries

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly, a comfortable life in the future? It might be easy to make such a promise, since he could just compensate with a sum of money. Even if he gave enough money for Zhang Xiaohua to live for his entire life, could he ensure that Zhang Xiaohua would be able to survive just with that money? What if another accident happened to him, would Zhang Xiaohua be able to do anything then?

Putting aside the amount of compensation, Zhang Xiaohua's youth had just been ruined, how could Zhang Xiaohua live happily if he had to rely on the compensation money for all his life? Would that be the kind of life Zhang Xiaohua hoped for?

All his dreams, all the happy experiences in the future, could they be compensated with money?

Other people may not know what Zhang Xiaohua's dreams were but Zhang Xiaohu did, Zhang Xiaohua's thirst towards learning martial arts was greater than his. If he knew that he could no longer practice martial arts, then would he still have the will to continue living?

Zhang Xiaohua was just a child!

Could a child take such a heavy blow?

Zhang Xiaohu felt regret and self-blame again, had he not agreed to the contest, if he did not come to Lotus escort, if he did not suggest going to Pingyang city... could he still change any of that?

Seeing the dark and confused expression on Zhang Xiaohu's face, third master

Qu quickly said, “Zhang Xiaohu, your aptitude is very good and I have been considering enrolling you in the martial arts school division. Now that you won Yu Deyi in a contest, I believe that the people in the martial arts school division will be convinced that your potential is no less than him and they will allow you to enter the school. You will still need to continue your duties as a delivery hand, but the martial arts school will not collect any fees from you.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly and said, “Third master Qu, thank you for your kind intentions, but my younger brother...”

Third master Qu looked at Yu Deyi and said, “Zhang Xiaohu, you do not need to worry about your younger brother’s situation. Once Yu Deyi settled his problem, I will go to Huanxi mountain villa to ask for a favor. As long as Huanxi mountain villa is still standing, your younger brother will have a place in it to work. This old face of mine still has some importance so I am sure that I will be able to do that for your younger brother.”

Having offered such a large concession, Zhang Xiaohu could only nod his head in agreement, and third master Qu and Yu Deyi secretly sighed in relief.

At that moment, the physician from the martial arts school had arrived and like how bureaucratic matters were usually slow to process, the physician arrived slowly and late. Even though the physician was reeking of alcohol, he was shocked by Zhang Xiaohua’s injuries and the first sentence that came out of his mouth was, “This hand is crippled.”

The second sentence was, “My head is spinning, I can’t treat him properly. Please find someone else.”

Third master Qu was so angry that he grabbed the physician’s neck and asked, “The physicians in the martial arts school are not allowed to drink during working hours, why did you not follow the rules?”

The physician righteously replied, “I am testing the effectiveness of this medicinal wine. Xi Yuehua tasted a hundred plants, so his later generations should take a leaf from his example. If I don’t taste it personally, how would I be able to ascertain its usefulness?”

Third master Qu threw him on the floor and said to Zhang Xiaohu, “Come, let’s bring Zhang Xiaohua to the physician there.”

Fortunately, the medicinal hall was at the corner of the martial arts school hall, and there was a physician who did not taste any wine personally. The old physician carefully straightened Zhang Xiaohua's broken arm and patiently put back all the shattered finger bones. Poor Zhang Xiaohua regained his consciousness when his arm was being set, and he fainted from the pain not long after. Sweat the size of beans appeared all over his forehead and his ten fingers curled, literally.

After the physician applied some medicine on Zhang Xiaohua and put on his crutches, Zhang Xiaohua woke up again.

While bearing the pain in his hands, he looked at his arm that was supported by the crutch and asked the physician, "When will my injury be healed?"

The physician looked at him pitiful and answered, "Child, take good care of your injury, the earliest it will take is a year and a half. Poor thing."

Zhang Xiaohua heard his reply and shouted, "Oh no, I am still meeting squad leader He to learn martial arts tonight, what can I do now?"

The physician said, "You are still thinking of martial arts with your injuries..."

Before the physician could complete his sentence, Zhang Xiaohu interrupted, "Xiaohua, your injury is not too serious, but you will have to forget about martial arts for the time being. First take good care of your injury, and once you are fully healed, you can ask squad leader He to teach you again. If not, isn't there still third master Qu? He is an expert in our martial arts school, and he would also be able to teach you martial arts."

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed when he heard Zhang Xiaohu's words, he looked towards the man as though he was his grandfather and asked, "Are you willing to teach me martial arts? Third master Qu."

Third master Qu naturally agreed profusely, saying, "That is no problem, Zhang Xiaohua. Once your injury is healed, I will teach you so well that you will surpass your elder brother."

Zhang Xiaohua expressed his thanks and suddenly remembered to say, "Second brother, I will not be able to work in Huanxi mountain villa with this injury, you should hurry over and let them know so that they won't throw me

away. Help me ask for a period of absence. Also, this is my pay for last month, I think we need to use this to pay for this treatment. I even said earlier that I would give it to you or deliver it back to our parents.”

After finishing his sentence, he struggled to use his left hand to take out those few coins from his breast and passed it to Zhang Xiaohu.

When third master Qu saw that, he threw a severe glance to Yu Deyi and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, your injury was caused by Yu Deyi it is natural for him to pay for your treatment. You don’t have to worry about this money. Furthermore, I will send some people immediately to Huanxi mountain villa to inform them of your situation so you can rest peacefully here in the escort station until your injury heals. With your elder brother here, you will be taken good care of, alright?”

Zhang Xiaohua grateful expression and his sincere words of thanks made third master Qu feel guilty, and he waved his hands and left the room, thinking to himself, “This poor, sweet child.”

When third master Qu left, only then did Yu Deyi have the courage to speak, he said, “Zhang Xiaohua, about this, I am really sorry. I... I was too agitated and should have not used inner energy. Don’t worry, I will definitely make it up to you until you are satisfied.”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the previously arrogant young master and became at a loss for words, if his fist had ended up like that after facing the other party’s palm, what would be the result if it was his second brother’s chest that was hit instead? Even a dummy would have known the answer, if the situation really turned out that way, would he use money to solve the situation? Sigh, of course he would still do so! Zhang Xiaohua was extremely sure of it.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the man weakly and nodded as he smiled. Yu Deyi then walked away slowly after he said, “Zhang Xiaohua, just focus on your recovery. I will get the physicians to give you the best medicine so you will be able to recover in no time.”

Shangguan Yun and Yu Lun also shared some condolences before they followed Yu Deyi and left.

There was still Li Jinfeng in the room, the scholar looked at Zhang Xiaohua not knowing how to console him, so he said, “Xiaohua, you are a good boy, and good

people will have their karma. You will surely recover soon. I will come to see you again tomorrow.”

After saying his piece, he patted Zhang Xiaohua’s head and turned around to leave. Just as he reached the door, he seemed to recall something and turned around to Zhang Xiaohu and said, “Zhang Xiaohu, I came over to apologize to you. I had promised before that I would bring you to the escort station but I actually forgotten about it. I am really sorry, please forgive me. Sigh, if I had brought Zhang Xiaohua somewhere else, all these might not have happened then.”

Without waiting for Zhang Xiaohu’s reply, he turned back and left.

Upon hearing his words, Zhang Xiaohu recalled the long-forgotten “grudge” and he shook his head secretly, if you had brought Zhang Xiaohua elsewhere, I would have “accepted” your apology.

Zhang Xiaohua said from his side, “Second brother, it was I who pulled gentleman Li over, and he only wanted to apologize to you after seeing that I was coming over. This person is so strange, when I mentioned the matter at the carriage station, he insisted on apologizing to me and coming over personally to apologize to you as well. I guess he would be able to sleep soundly tonight.”

When Zhang Xiaohu heard these words, he thought in his heart, how could there be so much difference among people? Thinking back to Li Jinfeng, then to Yu Deyi, Shangguan Yun ad Yu Lun, every one of them was different in their unique ways. Even though the two brothers had not been in Pingyang city for long, they could tell from this situation that people could be so unpredictable. However, at this moment, he wondered if he should let his parents know about Zhang Xiaohua’s injury, or bring Xiaohua back home to nurse his injury?

However, he made his decision very quickly. Since they were already out here, then they should decide their fates for themselves. If he informed his family of Zhang Xiaohua’s injury, even if he could continue to stay in the city, how could their parents help in this situation? He could save them the pain and worry, after all when their eldest brother was injured, didn’t they get him treated by the animal doctor in the village? Thinking of old Guo and his animal clinic, Zhang Xiaohua’s heart sweated in cold perspiration and decided to definitely not send

Zhang Xiaohua home.

Since he had made his decision, he wanted to listen to Zhang Xiaohua's opinion so he shared his decision and Zhang Xiaohua agreed, his little gourd shaped head shook like a drum as he insisted to stay.

At that moment, the physician re-entered the room and saw Zhang Xiaohua. He felt the latter's pulse again and said to Zhang Xiaohu, "Zhang Xiaohu, your younger brother's injuries are very serious, even though there is no external wound, but this type of injury is not even what normal people can endure. You have seen for yourself that he had fainted twice, and his face is so pale now so he must be exhausted. You can bring him back to rest for now, and be careful not to let that injured arm touch anything. I have already tried my best and I hope that your younger brother can recover fully. One more thing, third master Qu had already settled this so you don't have to worry about the medical bill, and I will use the best medicine for your younger brother. Sigh, actually there is no use for any better medicine, for a bone fracture, the solution is this word, "nurture". The medicine I applied on him already contained tiger bones which are the best medicine we have for healing fractures, and later on, I shall prescribe some painkillers and get some people to deliver it to you."

He then stroked Zhang Xiaohua's head and sighed again before leaving the room.

Zhang Xiaohu looked at his younger brother, and the latter was indeed perspiring heavily, his face was pale and his eyes looked dazed from exhaustion. Zhang Xiaohu felt pained again as he blamed his own carelessness, since their parents were not around, he should assume the role of the parent, so why did he not take more notice of his younger brother?

Thus, Zhang Xiaohu carefully lifted Zhang Xiaohua from the bed and prepared to move him to his own room. Even though Zhang Xiaohua was already being cautious, he was still clumsy having no prior experience taking care of patients and touched Zhang Xiaohua's injuries twice. Zhang Xiaohua shouted out in pain the first time when he did not notice but he tried to hold it in the second time despite his sweat dropping like buckets from his head.

Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohu did not touch Zhang Xiaohua's injuries on the rest

of the way back, and he felt less guilty afterwards.

Zhang Xiaohu's room was spacious because it was meant for two people to stay, but after Zhang Xiaohu gained victory over the bodyguard, sixth master Li send the other person to another room so Zhang Xiaohu could stay by himself and observe his own martial arts in his leisure. Hence, it was fortunate because the additional bed could be used for Zhang Xiaohua to nurse his injury.

After Zhang Xiaohu put Zhang Xiaohua down on the bed, he found a blanket to cover the boy. Although the weather was already hot, he was afraid that his younger brother would catch a cold with his weakened body so he a few particularly thick blankets for the latter.

Not long after, some men from the medicinal hall brought some medicine that was already prepared and boiled over. Zhang Xiaohu fed Zhang Xiaohua the medicine, and seeing that the latter was still drenched in perspiration, he wanted to give him a bath. However, the person who delivered the medicine took back the bowl and said that the physician had also instructed the patient not to move too much, so Zhang Xiaohua would have to bear with the sweat and not to wipe it off in case it aggravates his injuries during this period. Upon listening to the instructions, Zhang Xiaohu extinguished his previous thought.

The sky had gradually turned darker and after sending off the person who delivered the medicine, and when Zhang Xiaohu turned his head to look at Zhang Xiaohua, Zhang Xiaohua's eyes were already closed as he fell asleep. Which is a good thing, since the pitiful boy had suffered so much torment in the day, he deserved to enjoy some rest time earlier.

Zhang Xiaohu looked at his beloved younger brother's peaceful sleeping face which would occasionally frown in pain until the night grew later when he stopped moving altogether.

Deep in the night, Zhang Xiaohu lay beside Zhang Xiaohua with complex emotions in his heart as he slowly fell asleep. He already knew that he was sleepy but was afraid that his younger brother would call out for him in the middle of the night. Even though Zhang Xiaohua would sleep like a log all the way until morning in the past, since he was injured that night, Zhang Xiaohu decided to play safe and thus did not return to his bed to sleep.

The night grew deeper, and Zhang Xiaohua's dreams flashed with the usual bright flickering lights. The rhythm of the flashing lights seemed to be faster that night, and the bracelet on his left wrist seemed to shake and the fluctuations spread across its owner's body without him realizing anything, and most of the fluctuation seemed to flow towards the more injured areas. In this dark night, there were many secrets abound, some were bad, but there were also good ones.

When the first rays of the sun appeared in the sky, the vibration also stopped and Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes. just as he was about to rub his nose from habit, he felt a sharp pain in his right arm and he yelped out. The sound frightened Zhang Xiaohu who immediately got up and shouted, "What's wrong, Xiaohua?"

Upon seeing his second brother's face, and after looking around at his surroundings while feeling the pain transmitting from his left hand, Zhang Xiaohua remembered that he was still in Lotus escort and not his usual room in Huanxi mountain village. The person beside him was his beloved second brother and not the smelly legged Ma Jing. Zhang Xiaohua grinned and said, "It's nothing, second brother. I just woke up and accidentally used my right hand."

Zhang Xiaohu replied tenderly, "Oh, be more careful in the future. Even though there is a crutch, your bones will not mend correctly if you move your fingers. If it grows wrongly, then it will be difficult for it to be straightened back, I heard that we will need to break it again for it to grow properly again, so you have to be careful not to move it."

Zhang Xiaohua swallowed in surprise and fear, he said, "So cruel, break it again to regrow? You aren't lying right?"

Zhang Xiaohu laughed as he said, "The physician won't lie to his patients, he is the best physician in Lotus escort."

Zhang Xiaohua then learnt that the physician who treated him yesterday was the best physician in the escort station, and he thought that it was indeed true that outstanding people do not flaunt their superiority.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua's stomach suddenly grumbled, the sounds were especially loud. Upon hearing it, Zhang Xiaohu laughed as he said,

“Xiaohua, your stomach is already grumbling. You must be hungry, let me prepare some food for you.”

Zhang Xiaohua was slightly embarrassed as he said, “Hurry and go, second brother. I had not had lunch nor dinner yesterday, how can I not be hungry now?”

The pitiful Zhang Xiaohua had not eaten since the previous day morning, he actually planned to have his meal with his second brother but he met Yu Deyi instead and the events just flowed from there. He also slept on an empty stomach last night apart drinking from a bowl of bitter leaf juices, but nursing injuries would require the body to absorb nutrients so it was no wonder than his stomach was objecting then.

Even before Zhang Xiaohu left the room, a knock sounded from the door and when he opened the door, he saw Yu Lun carrying over some food. After asking the other party, he learnt that it was a gesture from Yu Deyi, the latter had also suffered internal injuries the previous day and was nursing them while bedridden so he was unable to go over personally. Thus, he entrusted Yu Lun with the task, and when Zhang Xiaohu learnt this, he naturally did not stand on the ceremony and placed the food on the table as he prepared to feed Zhang Xiaohua.

Yu Lun did not enter the room but he promised to go back again in the afternoon to bring over lunch before leaving.

Yu Lun’s consideration could be seen from the breakfast, there were several nourishing dishes that were easy on the stomach, and when Zhang Xiaohua ate the meal, he felt that they were even more delicious than the breakfasts in Huanxi mountain villa. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua finished his bowl cleanly and even thought secretly if he should stay injured like this to enjoy such a meal longer.

Zhang Xiaohu watched happily as Zhang Xiaohua finished his breakfast, seeing the latter eat his meal with such relish, he guessed it meant that his body was healthy enough to absorb nutrients to recover, so he felt happy inside.

After putting the bowls and utensils aside, Zhang Xiaohu said, “Xiaohua, you have to stay in the room to rest by yourself, I will need to eat some breakfast too. After I am done, the escort station will still have some duties for me, and once I am finished with that, I will come back here again. I will let sixth master Li

know of our situation, so hopefully he will let me come back earlier today.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “It’s alright, second brother, you can go on with your stuff while I rest here and mend my body slowly.”

Chapter 97: Self-realization

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Self-realization

Zhang Xiaohu stayed for a little longer to remind his younger brother before he left. After all, he was still an employee of the Lotus escort and has to earn his worth. Even though the new delivery hands had no jobs in the beginning unlike the bodyguards who have to immediately start work and leave faraway, there were still many duties in the escort station that had to be complete. They had to take care of more things on usual days, and there were also many things that they had to learn. Furthermore, the escort station was paying them a monthly salary, so shouldn't Zhang Xiaohu at least show his face?

The room became quiet after Zhang Xiaohu left.

Zhang Xiaohua was only a ten year old plus child, there were not many times when he was left alone, but unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua was reminded constantly of his injuries by the pain in his hand. Zhang Xiaohua wanted to sleep more but once he closed his eyes, his eyes wanted to open themselves, and after many attempts, he gave up on the idea of sleeping more. Instead, he looked straight at the ceiling as his thoughts wandered towards his martial arts training.

During the match between Zhang Xiaohu and Yu Deyi on the previous day, even though Yu Deyi finally gained the upper hand and clinched the victory, he was unable to push Zhang Xiaohu against the wall with just fist martial arts alone. When Zhang Xiaohua thought of the overbearing force from the inner energy, his eyes turned hot involuntarily. During then, Zhang Xiaohu only saw that the purple colored fist was moving in an impossible speed and did not get to experience firsthand its might, but Zhang Xiaohua actually felt the full force of the inner energy on his body. The force from the palm was unstoppable as it drilled into Zhang Xiaohua's fist and destroyed everything in its path, even

flinging his body into the air like a rag doll. Zhang Xiaohua could even remember the feeling when the inner energy surged through his body before he lost his consciousness, even though he had not much experience in martial arts, he could tell that the force was not simple physical force.

Furthermore, when Yu Deyi activated his inner energy, the qinggong which he displayed was like a rabbit under the pursuit of an eagle when he caused Zhang Xiaohu to become helpless, everything was based on his inner energy, and when thinking back further into the past, hero Wen and heroine Xue also used qinggong when they left and it would not be possible to move in the speed that had without inner energy.

The more he thought about it, the greater the thirst was in Zhang Xiaohua, when would he be able to learn a real inner energy cultivation method? From what he heard Yu Deyi and Shagguan Yun said on the previous day, it seemed that a martial artist without background like him would hardly get the chance to chance upon this type of secret martial art.

“Sigh” Zhang Xiaohua sighed, it was better if he concentrate on his fist martial arts for now. If he could not even master the foundational requirements, he could only let down the kind person who was willing to impart such a treasure to him.

If Zhang Xiaohua had known that Yu Deyi retracted seventy percent of his inner energy during their confrontation, perhaps he would even lose the confidence to continue training his fist martial arts.

Actually, when Zhang Xiaohu met Li Jinfeng and heard that Zhang Xiaohu had only learnt a single type of fist martial art, he already had a rough idea in his head, but unable to develop it further due to the unexpected delays. Now that he was bedridden, it was a good opportunity to rethink on how he should learn martial arts.

His aptitude was nowhere close to his second brother Zhang Xiaohu, and even squad leader He said that Zhang Xiaohua’s talent was abnormally poor. Under these type of circumstances, Zhang Xiaohua could only put in hundred times the effort and time to train martial arts, except, he was not sure what was the problem with his head; during his youth, his teacher had also said that he was

not stupid so why was he so forgetful when it came to martial arts? At least he could still remember some stances, and these stances came naturally to him and he would not forget them. If not, the worse scenarios was if he forgot what he learnt after learning something new, like a rattan basket trying to catch water.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua naturally recalled the martial arts that squad leader He and little second and third Nie taught, those few incomplete stances in his memory were like water as it flowed within his memory, and each stance was as clear as stone in clear water, although those that were forgotten remained completely forgotten.

It was a really strange matter.

When Zhang Xiaohua was training martial arts under the guidance of the people in Huanxi mountain villa, he had learnt many types of fist martial arts and had memorized around thirty stances in total from all of them. These thirty stances were from different types of martial arts, they had no similarities, and even the stances he remembered from the same martial arts were not consecutive movements, they were results of his imagination as he tried to piece them together, and even squad leader He shook his head when he saw his attempt. At that moment, the thirty stances flowed around his head and Zhang Xiaohua slowly felt dazed before falling asleep. However, these stances began to become messy, and among the mess, two stances suddenly linked together perfectly without any signs of disharmony. This unexpected result jolted Zhang Xiaohua awake, but by the time he tried to recall the stances, their images were already gone from his head. This little accident could cause such a huge wave in his head, what on earth had just happened? How could a random stance from a martial art join so perfectly with another one? Was it his imagination, or was there some other explanation?

The more he thought the more excited Zhang Xiaohua grew, and he could not wait to try out the martial arts and forgot that he was still lying on bed with a crutch on his right hand. The moment he tried to move his hand, a pain drilled through his heart and he yelped out loudly.

At that moment, an urgent sounding voice came from outside, "Xiaohua, what's the problem? Did your injury start hurting again?"

When he turned up to look, Zhang Xiaohu had already rushed into the room. Zhang Xiaohu looked at his second brother and said sheepishly, "It is nothing, second brother, I was careless and accidentally touched my injured hand."

"Sigh, how could you be so abnormally careless?" Zhang Xiaohu scolded as he carefully wiped off the sweat on the boy's forehead. He said, "Right before I left, I already reminded you to be careful yet you have forgotten it so fast, do you want your fingers to grow twisted?"

"Haha, I will be more careful in the future." Upon seeing his second brother nagged like a mother, Zhang Xiaohua felt a surge of warmth and he hurriedly comforted Zhang Xiaohu.

However, Zhang Xiaohua soon turned puzzled and he asked Zhang Xiaohu, "Second brother, you had left not long ago, why did you come back so soon? Was there nothing to do in the escort station?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled as he replied, "I have only entered the escort station for slightly over a month, so am considered new and have not much to do apart from familiarizing myself with the matters of the station. Sixth master Li allowed me to concentrate on my training because my martial arts aptitude was not bad so he would seldom look for him, and now that you are injured, he was probably being sympathetic and gave me more time to look after you. Furthermore, sixth master Li probably learnt that third master Qu had permitted me to learn martial arts in the martial arts school division so he did not give me much work today, and hence I could hurry back to see you."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "That is nice, so you should continue your training to make up for their kindness. You also seemed to be pondering on something when I came over yesterday. Oh right, second brother, what do you delivery hands usually do every day?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly as he replied, "If it is just a delivery hand, then we are not much better off than the servants in the station, so we will have to do all kinds of chores without any say in the matter. What about you? I wanted to ask more about you yesterday but didn't had the time to do so, what do you do in Huanxi mountain villa?"

"Guess?" Zhang Xiaohua poked at Zhang Xiaohu teasingly.

“What is there to guess, lady Qiu Tong previously mentioned it before she took you away, it was something to do with growing herbs right?”

Zhang Xiaohua said unhappily, “Why bother asks if you already knew?”

“I was only asking if that was what you really did there, and if it was tiring for you?” Zhang Xiaohu said innocently.

“Not tired, not tired at all, second brother. The work was not much different from what we do at home, and it is in fact slightly easier. Oh, by the way, what do you eat in the escort station? In our mountain villa... ..” Zhang Xiaohua’s spirits rose as he described his life in Huanxi mountain villa for the past month to his second brother in whole.

Zhang Xiaohu was feeling very satisfied when he heard Zhang Xiaohua’s story, he was originally worrying if his younger brother would be bullied by others in an unfamiliar place. It seemed that he had thought too much, Ma Jing and the other servants could only be fertilizers to Zhang Xiaohua, while fertilizers may be smelly, it was essential to grow healthy crops, and without these little tricks and jokes, how could his younger brother mature faster?

As he thought back again, Zhang Xiaohua had close to one thousand jin of strength in both his arms combined, he should have been happy if his younger brother did not go around bullying others, what was there for him to be worried about? Perhaps this was just the unwarranted concern of a mother when her son was a thousand li away.

However, when he heard up to He Tianshu from Piaomiao sect personally instructing Zhang Xiaohua, he became stunned and asked, “Xiaohua, was there really such a good offer? Someone taught you martial arts without asking for anything in return?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, “That’s right, I do not know how elder sister Qiu Tong managed it, oh right, the elder sister villa master is even nicer. I have never met her before but she instructed someone to teach me martial arts, I must thank her when I find the chance in the future. When I finished learning the martial arts, I will personally find elder sister villa master to express my gratitude. I have learnt from Li Jinfeng to thank people who have shown me kindness.”

When he thought again of how Zhang Xiaohua would not be able to learn martial arts in the future, Zhang Xiaohu felt a wave of sadness in his heart, but he could not bear to spoil his younger brother's excitement so he held back his tears and said, "Good, Zhang Xiaohua. Repay kindness when treated kindly and take revenge when there is a grudge, this is the way of the people in Jianghu. Second brother will wait for the day when you finished your training in martial arts." After finishing his sentence, he stroke Zhang Xiaohua's head and picked himself up to take something, while quickly wiping his tears away before the latter could see him.

Zhang Xiaohua was caught up in his excitement so he naturally did not notice any abnormality in his second brother's behavior, he said, "Perhaps I will never finish learning martial arts."

Zhang Xiaohu was caught by surprise and he quickly turned around and said, "Xiaohua, do not worry about your injury, the physician had said that you will recover soon, and you can learn martial arts again when that time comes."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "It's not that, second brother, I have heard what the physician said yesterday and I know I will be better not long later, and can continue my training then, but, but..."

Zhang Xiaohu asked urgently, "But what?"

At that moment, a tinge of redness appeared on Zhang Xiaohua's pale face as he said, "Second brother, my aptitude is not as cool as yours, you can defeat a martial artist who trained for years after just one month of training, but the martial arts I train are all incomplete, and I can only practice a few stances in each fist martial art."

When Zhang Xiaohu heard his reply, he felt a huge sense of relief and said, "So what, I am only good at fist martial arts, and my opponent did not use inner energy to fight against me. If it was a real match, how could I be the other party's opponent? Sigh, all because of this inner energy cultivation method. Also, you do not need to worry about having poor aptitude, just make it up with more practice. If other people practiced it once, you can practice it ten times, and if it is still not enough, you can practice twenty, or even a hundred times, I don't believe that you cannot succeed!"

Even after hearing his second brother's spirited and confident words, Zhang Xiaohua was still unconvinced and he said, "Second brother, you do not understand. Even if I had practiced a hundred times, I will still forget everything cleanly by the second day after I wake up."

"Ah? There is such a thing? You really trained for a hundred times?" Zhang Xiaohu became puzzled.

"Although not up to a hundred times, but I have trained for at least forty to fifty times and still cannot remember." Zhang Xiaohua replied dejectedly.

"Then that is really strange. I have heard that for normal martial arts, a normal person should memorize most, if not all the stances after practicing it for ten times."

"However, second brother, there is another thing that is weird."

"What is it?"

"That is, no matter what fist martial art it is, I only need to practice it once to remember how much I can remember, and will never forget it again. Even if I trained up to fifty times, I will not remember another additional stance."

Zhang Xiaohu felt his heart shuddered and he said, "In that case, Xiaohua, perhaps you are really not suited for martial arts. How about this, once your injuries have healed, don't continue training martial arts and start concentrating on farming instead. If you can grow plants well enough, then even the Huanxi mountain villa would value your talent."

"I cannot, second brother, the villa master will still have the final say in hiring people with these type of skills. If she does not have a good opinion, then your welfare will be poorer, and furthermore, I heard that the retirement money is not much. From what I see, I should continue to train in martial arts. If Huanxi mountain villa give me a pension, then I would retire over there, if not I can jump ship to somewhere else." Zhang Xiaohua explained confidently.

Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua's determination was not minor, Zhang Xiaohu did not dare to persuade the former any further in fear that he would realize the seriousness of his own injuries. He said, "Then you can do what you think is best for yourself. However, it doesn't hurt to learn these side skills as they will only

benefit you. If the retirement plan is not attractive enough, then you can think of better opportunities later on.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “I understand, second brother. Oh right, I just found out... .. Never mind, wait till I figure it out fully before telling you.”

Seeing that his younger brother did not want to talk about the mysterious subject, Zhang Xiaohu did not pursue it any further.

However, Zhang Xiaohua quickly asked again, “Second brother, I heard yesterday that you only train in the sixth fist, I thought that you were trying to specialize in only one fist martial art, placing quality over quantity, is my conjecture correct? Or is there another reason behind it, can you tell me more about it?”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’ shy expression, Zhang Xiaohu burst into laughter as this subject was not a big secret, it was not even a secret. If his younger brother who could no longer practice martial arts asked him this question, how could he not answer the former? He smiled and replied, “Xiaohua, you are right, quality over quantity! I have actually tried training in other martial arts such as the Rohan fist. However, after memorizing it, I realized something strange. Every martial art has its offensive and defensive stances, but these two martial arts have different types of offence and defense. The style they used, the ways they protect and attack are different, so that made me think if all martial arts were like this? A human body is only so large, and the places one can defend and attack are only so few. Could it be that every martial art attacks and protects these few areas, and they only differ in their style? Following this reasoning, I tried exploring with other martial arts that other people had trained in and realized that it was just as I have assumed. Thus, I decided not to expand my repertoire in martial arts, and simply focus on this sixth fist. It is my very first martial art after all, and the stances it contains are complex and comprehensive. Think about it, I have trained this martial art for a whole month, so it should be better than other people who learnt bits and pieces everywhere and switch around in their styles without any profound increase in their offence or defense. In fact, reality has proven me right, that just by relying on this sixth fist, I am able to hold my own against people with many styles and fist martial arts.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard this, he felt overwhelmed; his second brother was

really a genius!

Actually, this was not just Zhang Xiaohua's personal opinion, if any martial art expert had heard Zhang Xiaohu's previous words, they would recognize this youth as their peer. This philosophy towards martial arts was not uncommon, there are many various styles from the many different sects in Jianghu, but at the basis of their techniques are just the two paths offence and defense. For Zhang Xiaohu to recognize this after just one month since his initiation to martial arts could only be described by the word "genius". However, Lotus escort was only a small corner on earth, where could a top martial expert appear from and polish this diamond in the rough?

After listening to Zhang Xiaohu's word, Zhang Xiaohua pondered and felt that they were all true. However, this was the path for Zhang Xiaohu which is not suitable for Zhang Xiaohua to follow, given his aptitude to only remember a few stances from each martial arts, how could he reach the level of such awareness in offence and defense?

Sigh, how could there be such a large difference between people?

"However, just training this fist martial art alone is not enough." Zhang Xiaohu continued to explain, "On one hand, without the application of inner energy, this martial art is just like a paper tiger. As you have seen for yourself yesterday, my martial art lost all its effectiveness the moment Yu Deyi activated his inner energy. In front of absolute power, all fancy strokes and sequences will be pulverized into nothingness. On the other hand, this sixth fist that I have chosen to study is a very basic and widespread martial art in Jianghu, there are still many sects out there with offensive and defensive stances that are even more profound and effective. If this normal martial art would face off against theirs, who would not be able to guess the result? Sigh, I wonder what is the special martial art of the Piaomiao sect which is so close to us?"

Zhang Xiaohu looked out of the window as he became preoccupied with his thoughts.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu's depression, Zhang Xiaohua comforted, "Second brother, do not be discouraged. Given your potential, the Piaomiao sect will definitely invite you in if they knew about it."

Zhang Xiaohu said, “Oh, I got it, Xiaohua, you do not have to comfort me. I am already fully satisfied with the opportunities I have now, so why would I aspire for anything else?”

Chapter 98: Fist martial art manual

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Fist martial art manual

Zhang Xiaohua said slyly, "When there is a will, there is a way. Wasn't it because elder brother was looking for a bride that he found his motivation and succeeded? Second brother must motivate himself too."

"Dan" Zhang Xiaohu landed his fist on Zhang Xiaohua's head and said, "The person is small but his guts are big. Don't worry, your second brother's heart is completely set on the Jianghu, and he will become someone who helps the needy and defenseless."

"Oh right, there was a reason why I wanted to learn martial arts in the martial arts school, and that is to learn how to cultivate inner energy. This may be my only chance to do so." Zhang Xiaohu explained to Zhang Xiaohua.

"Really, second brother, if you learn inner energy cultivation methods in the martial arts school division, then can you teach them to me as well?" Zhang Xiaohua said excitedly with his heart full of expectations.

Zhang Xiaohu could not bear to let Zhang Xiaohua down so he answered, "Look at what you are saying, Xiaohua. As long as second brother learns it and can teach you, I will definitely do so, how would I bear to hide it from you?"

"However," Zhang Xiaohu gave the latter a reality check, "Even though the martial arts school can teach its student inner energy cultivation methods, not everyone will get the chance to learn it. Apart from aptitude, they will also look at a person's background for an intimate connection with the escort station. Sigh, even if I could enter the martial arts school, it will still be difficult to learn an inner energy cultivation method."

Zhang Xiaohua replied in disagreement, "Second brother's aptitude is so good,

and our family background is clear. Even though we are connected to the escort station now, that may not be the case in the future. Perhaps that was what sixth master Li was thinking when he spoke a good word for you.”

Zhang Xiaohu was very aware of his situation and said, “I heard that this aptitude towards inner energy cultivation method differs from the aptitude towards fist martial arts. Everyone can learn fist martial arts, but the same cannot be said for inner energy cultivation methods. Some people would train for many years before have a sliver of improvement, and other people will be able to step over to greater distances the moment they picked it up. Whether or not I have this aptitude is still not proven yet.”

“I think you will not have a problem, second brother, I have seen how good you are!” Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he said, “Furthermore, the inner energy cultivation method in Lotus escort should be pretty good, or at least up to Yu Deyi’s standard. You have seen yesterday how powerful his purple sand fist was and yet he still chooses to come here to learn martial arts, and Shangguan Yun also seemed to have an understanding towards inner energy and he also chose to come here secretly. And there is also Yu Lun who has not learnt about inner energy before but still came here to do so, you were not there yesterday when I saw how he bootlicked Yu Deyi as though he saw his master.”

Zhang Xiaohu said exasperatedly, “That’s right, he is also pitiful. He had to give up his dignity to pursue something that cannot be easily obtained, it has also been hard for him.”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed, “Dignity? Difficult on him? While sitting in the carriage, we could already see how he tried to butter up to Shangguan Yun, and from the way he acted yesterday, it was like a light carriage on a familiar road, so I doubt that he has given up yet.”

Zhang Xiaohu straightened his face and said, “Xiaohua, don’t be too quick to place your judgement on other people, everyone has their own way of life and so do we, so why bother about them?”

Zhang Xiaohua lowered his brows and said, “Amitabha, younger brother has been enlightened.”

After saying that, he burst out into laughter.

Zhang Xiaohu also laughed happily.

Time passes quickly when one is with someone he loves, and it became afternoon before they realized it. Yu Lun came as promised and Zhang Xiaohua ate the expectedly delicious food with relish. With Zhang Xiaohu's help, he finished every crumb and even Zhang Xiaohu was surprised, was this the appetite of an injured patient?

After his meal, the Zhang Xiaohua who did not have any rest in the morning was feeling tired so Zhang Xiaohu let him sleep peacefully.

When Zhang Xiaohua was fast asleep, Zhang Xiaohu would continue to practice even and every stance of the sixth fist in his room patiently. His movements were sometimes quick, and slow at other times as he carefully felt the sensation of his movements with an expression of satisfaction in his eyes, as if he was drunk in his own fantasy.

The sleeping Zhang Xiaohua had dazedly entered the state which he was in during morning, and the thirty stances which he had learnt was swimming around his head again. Within the flow of his imagination, there were little figures of Zhang Xiaohua displaying each of the stance, and after a long while, the image became messy and two figures would occasionally link perfectly to each other. Suddenly, a tidal wave suddenly washed over Zhang Xiaohua's heart as fast as lightning waking the boy up, and as Zhang Xiaohua tried to remember his dream, he was unable to recall any traces of it.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua noticed Zhang Xiaohu practicing his fist martial arts patiently in the empty space of the room. As he watched on, his heart could not help but moved as an idea flowed into his head, could these thirty stances he remembered be linked together to form part of a martial art?

The more he thought about it, the less he was convinced by the idea, it was too far-fetched. Who would do something as silly as break a martial art into different martial arts? Did he have too much idle time?

However, this idea was like a seed in his heart, it would occasionally surface in his head involuntarily but he was not able to dig it out. By that time, he had lost his interest in watching Zhang Xiaohu's practice.

Suddenly, he thought of another idea again. Since he was unable to practice a

full set of martial arts, why not link these incomplete martial art stances together to form his own fist martial art?

He could walk his own path and practice a martial art that belonged solely to him.

But, was this feasible?

He immediately washed away his uncertainty, why not?

Hadn't the two stances linked themselves together just now? Since he already had thirty stances and much time on his hands, why not try it out?

Perhaps he could succeed?

Zhang Xiaohua became nervous and his heart pumped faster. The weather was hot and he was covered with thick blankets yet his body felt cold, was this the effect of his excitement?

A newborn calf is unafraid of a tiger, and only Zhang Xiaohua who had this sort of mindset having never taught martial arts with proper instruction could think of such an unbelievable idea. If squad leader He knew his thoughts, he would definitely first feel the boy's forehead to see if he had a fever, and then cry and yell all the way back to Ou Yan to let her send Xiaohua to the martial arts learning hall of Piaomiao sect, so that the boy could learn the elementary syllabus of martial arts with the other four to five year old children. He Tianshu will also definitely use this piece of advice that masters commonly imparted to their disciples, "Self-learning is very dangerous, one must follow the proper education method or he will have no future to speak of."

The sixth fist, Rohan fist are all entry-level martial arts that have been tested and proven over uncountable years to become what they were, even modifying one stance would be incomparably difficult yet Zhang Xiaohua planned to use them to form his own fist martial art. If Zhang Xiaohua said that he could do it, the entire population of Jianghu will burst into laughter.

A pity that Zhang Xiaohua did not know these, and he was trying at that moment to piece the jumbled martial arts stances together like a jigsaw toy.

What he thought would be an easy task, since it was only thirty stances, became incredibly complex and Zhang Xiaohua's head became dizzy from the

effort. Unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua had not learnt combinations and permutations in mathematics so he did not know how difficult it was to piece thirty martial arts stances together.

Slowly, he began to feel signs of despair, but upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu concentrating deeply on repeating two or three of the stances with a serious expression on his face, he thought that since they were blood brothers, then he should not be too stupid. Instead of piecing all thirty pieces together, Zhang Xiaohua thought that he could begin with putting two stances together first before linking them into larger groups, and indeed, Zhang Xiaohua found two stances that perfectly linked together not long after. Unfortunately, as he tried to form his second pair, his efforts were not as fruitful and he could not find any other stances that linked together as perfectly as the first.

Zhang Xiaohua entered a deep introspective mood again, was his way of thought wrong? However, since he had at least put two stances together, it meant that this road was viable so what else is there to think about?

Suddenly, a strange thought came into his mind, the stances he learnt were only incomplete parts of many stances in a martial art and there were others that he still had to learn, if he wanted to create a complete martial art, he would need to learn the rest of the stances.

However, from Zhang Xiaohua's month of experience training in martial arts, he estimated that he would have to spend much time to learn many more martial arts to find the other missing stances. It would depend on his how memory to see how many stances he would remember from each martial art, but how many stances were there in his final complete fist martial art, and how many martial arts would he have to learn as a result?

Zhang Xiaohua naturally did not have the answer to how long he would need, but as for how many stances there will be, all he had to do was link all the martial arts stances perfectly together, and his fist martial art would reach its large accomplishment stage.

However, Zhang Xiaohua was immediately stumped with another question, how could he learn all these other martial arts? From the way squad leader He looked at him, it seemed that the former was disappointed at him and would not

be willing to teach him further. Even if Zhang Xiaohua were to beg, he felt embarrassed of his own aptitude, if he could only remember bits and pieces from each martial art, where would he find the nerve to ask for further instruction?

Even if He Tianshu was willing to teach him, could the martial arts he teach fulfill Zhang Xiaohua's huge requirement? Could it make up for the frighteningly poor memory of his?

It seemed that he had to find another way, but what can he do? Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly, he had overcome many difficulties to come Pingyang city, and gone through so many twists and turns before he managed to secure He Tianshu as an instructor to teach him martial arts. Wouldn't it be a fool's dream to hope to find another instructor?

Of course, he could ask his second brother to teach him martial arts. However, the idea perished as soon as he thought of it, Zhang Xiaohu had his own path on the martial art road and it involved focusing on a single fist martial art. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua could not let Zhang Xiaohu break his "chastity" just to help him, and he knew that his second brother would immediately deviate from his own training if he asked.

Sigh, learning could be considered as faith, but it was truly difficult.

Forget it, Zhang Xiaohua shook his head. The phrase "There will naturally be a road that reaches the mountain, and there will definitely be a Biaoichi (speeding) carriage if there is a road" appeared in his mind, this phrase was indeed the "Biaoichi" carriage station's advertising slogan. When his injuries heal, perhaps he would find a solution to his problem then.

Zhang Xiaohua lay on his bed and looked at the ceiling in boredom, his right hand as still hurting and it could not move at all, these days spent nurturing his injuries will be difficult to bear apart from the delicious food.

Zhang Xiaohu was still engrossed in studying and improving his understanding of the sixth fist. Zhang Xiaohua was puzzled, his second brother had already practiced this fist martial art for more than a month, how could he still be so interested in it? He definitely would not be able to maintain his interest, and this was probably the difference arising from different people.

At that moment, a knock rang from outside the door, Zhang Xiaohu kept back

his martial arts stance and went to open the door, and it was the scholar Li Jinfeng that had come to visit Zhang Xiaohua.

When Li Jinfeng entered the room, he said, "I am sorry, Xiaohua. I still had classes in the morning so I could not come by, hence I came straight after that. How are you feeling today?"

Zhang Xiaohua felt touched and he said, "Elder brother Li, you do not have to visit me if you are busy. This type of injury that I have will be healed in no time, and I don't feel particularly uncomfortable anywhere as well, apart from the pain."

Li Jinfeng sat by the bed, looked at Zhang Xiaohu and said, "Since we all came to Pingyang city together, it can be counted as fate tying us together. To be honest, even though my household is better off than yours, we are not so wealthy compared to the rest. I chose to pursue literature, unlike the two of you who are learning martial arts to enter the Jianghu, and this actually made me envious. I am also the only child in my household, so seeing the close relationship the both of you share makes me even more jealous, which is why I wanted to get closer to you. Brother Xiaohu, I hope you don't mind."

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised and he quickly replied, "Gentleman Li is exaggerating, you are a scholar who is bound to a good future, how can we compare to you. If you wish to come over more often, we will be more than willing to welcome you, why would we mind at all?"

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, "Stop calling me so politely, and don't be so courteous in your speech. I will be finding the both of you to chat more often in the future."

Zhang Xiaohua said happily, "Alright, elder brother Li, I like a lively atmosphere, so come as often as you can."

Li Jinfeng replied happily, "Alright, Xiaohua. Honestly, it is not easy to find people to get along with when you are out and alone."

"Oh right, I also bought some snacks on the streets just now, would you be able to eat them in your current condition?" Li Jinfeng said as he brought out a small cloth package, from which he took out some snacks.

“Can, I can eat it, why wouldn’t I be able to.” Seeing that there was something nice to eat, Zhang Xiaohua said immediately.

Zhang Xiaohu took the snacks over and fed Zhang Xiaohua, making the latter overjoyed as he said, “Thank you elder brother Li, this snack is really delicious, I have never eaten it before. I love to eat the most, and I don’t think the physician had instructed me to avoid any particular food, a good appetite is a good body after all.”

Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua enjoyed the snack, Li Jinfeng also felt happy as though he was looking at himself from the past.

He then took out an old and tattered book from his breast and said, “This is the fist martial art manual that I found in the library while I was reading, it seemed that someone had left it there. Rather than to let it sit and rot, I thought of bringing it to you since you can’t move about while nursing your injuries. When you are bored, you can read it to pass the time.”

Zhang Xiaohua thought that he was getting something good but when he saw the book, his face turned bitter as he said, “Why is it a book? Elder brother Li, I can’t read. I may recognize a few words here and there, but reading a book will be too difficult.”

“Oh?” Li Jinfeng also felt embarrassed as he said, “I have overlooked this possibility. Haha, however, Xiaohua, this is a book on fist martial arts. I have flipped through it and the contents are mostly pictures instead. There are some words inside to describe the moves, perhaps you can understand when you read them?”

“Fist martial art manual?” Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he said, “I wonder what a fist martial art manual is?”

Li Jinfeng was astonished when he heard these words, he said, “You do not know what a fist martial art manual is?”

Zhang Xiaohua asked back, “I don’t know, why must I know it?”

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, “Fist martial arts manual is a book that contains martial arts technique, I thought that all the people who practice martial arts who know them but I guess this is not the case.”

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned red as he said, "I only started practicing recently, and not everyone would know what a fist martial art manual is, there are always exceptions to a case. Second brother, did you know?"

"This, about this, I heard of this before so it can be counted as a yes." Zhang Xiaohu's face also turned slightly hot.

Li Jinfeng knew that the two brothers came from the village and are unaware of many things so he did not make fun of them, he said, "Even though I don't practice martial arts, I have at least read several stories and accounts so my knowledge on the subject is not trivial. It has been said that martial arts used to be taught from oral description so secrets could be kept. However, if one of the inheritor of the martial arts learnt something wrong, he would cause the future generations to learn wrongly as well. Or in the case where a person disappears before he found someone to inherit his martial arts, the martial art would be lost forever. Hence, some smart people later recorded the techniques and explanations into books which were convenient to pass around. Thus, there came to be fist martial arts manual, sword manuals, spear manuals, kick manuals, whip manuals and the like, although I have not seen them before."

Zhang Xiaohua's eyes brightened as he asked, "Elder brother Li has not seen of energy manuals before?"

Li Jinfeng was surprised and he asked back, "What are energy manuals?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "That is a book that contains inner energy cultivation methods."

Li Jinfeng shook his head and said, "No, but they may exist."

"Oh~" Zhang Xiaohua shook his head in disappointment, if he could obtain this "energy manual", then it would be the best situation possible, and his brother and he can follow the pictures to learn inner energy cultivation.

However, he was still happy because it was already not bad that he could learn fist martial arts. He was still wondering how to pick up new fist martial arts just now, and Li Jinfeng actually sent him a way. With fist martial art manuals, could he self-learn and not find an instructor anymore? It seemed that all his problems were solved with this.

Chapter 99: Learning the words

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Learning the words

When Zhang Xiaohua took the old and tattered fist martial art manual and flipped through its pages excitedly, his mood shifted and he did not know whether to laugh or cry. What were these things in the book, those small pictures of people exchanging kicks and punches one after another, or many arrow heads around them, or the bunch of small characters written on the side? No matter how he looked at manual, he could not understand its content, so how was he going to read it?

He closed the book unhappily and only then did he notice the three words on its cover with the only word he recognized as “Er”. Zhang Xiaohua asked suspiciously, “Elder brother Li, what fist martial art manual is this?”

Li Jinfeng smiled as he pointed to the three large words and said, “Isn’t it written on the cover? Erlang fist.”

“Oh, so it is actually Erlang fist.” Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and pondered. He had learnt this fist martial art before and could only remember two stances from it. Thus, he flipped open the fist martial art manual again and searched over and over again, but none of the stances in the book was similar to what he learnt. He felt strange, could it be that this manual was not the Erlang fist martial art manual, or the martial art he learnt was not the Erlang fist?

Zhang Xiaohu saw that Zhang Xiaohua was flipping through the book page by page non-stop as though he was looking for something so he asked curiously, “Xiaohua, why are you looking at it over and over again? Shouldn’t this fist martial art manual be read page by page instead?”

Zhang Xiaohua raised his head and said, “Second brother, I have learnt this

Erlang fist before, but I somehow cannot find the two stances that I remembered in this manual.”

“Ah? You only remembered two stances from this martial art?” Zhang Xiaohu asked in disbelief.

“Yes, I also do not know why but I can only remember two stances, and the stances were not linked to each other.” Zhang Xiaohua replied in embarrassment.

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said. “It is alright, to have remembered something is still pretty good. Look at me, I only know one fist martial art. Here, let me take a look at it.”

After finishing his sentence, he took the fist martial art manual from Zhang Xiaohua’s hands and flipped through it page by page before using his hands to motion something in the air. After half a bell of time, Zhang Xiaohu said, “I understand now, Xiaohua. While I do not know if this fist martial art manual really describes the Erlang fist, I can ascertain that it is a type of martial art. Look at this first stance, the left hand forms an upright palm in front of the chest, isn’t there an arrow head pointing upwards. This means that the left palm is thrust upwards. Perhaps the stance you remembered was to thrust your palm upward from your chest, which is why it looks slightly different from the pictures.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and said, “Second brother, that makes sense. I will try and look through it again.”

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua continued to flip through the fist martial art manual, and after reaching a certain page, he suddenly shouted in excitement, “Second brother, I found it, this is the stance. Yup, there is no doubt about it, this is the stance I remembered. However, it seemed like the picture is more powerful looking, and the direction of his fist is slightly lower.”

When Zhang Xiaohu leaned over to look, Zhang Xiaohua added, “However, it should still be the Erlang fist. Squad leader He told me that the stances I remembered was not entirely the same, especially in many small details.”

“It’s okay, as long as you can fight with it.” Zhang Xiaohu naturally would not mind these small details, the physician had already said that Zhang Xiaohua would never be able to practice martial arts again, so the concern he mentioned

would not matter.

When Zhang Xiaohu looked at the page of the manual, he said. “Oh, you are probably correct, let me try it out.”

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohu followed the manual and entered the appropriate position before performing the stance slowly. Upon watching his demonstration, Zhang Xiaohua said, “That’s correct, second brother, it is that move. Haha, so this manual is actually something so great.”

“However, what does it say over there?” Zhang Xiaohu asked Li Jinfeng as he pointed to the string of words at the side.

Li Jinfeng took the manual and read the words out, “This art beats people like walking, sees people like wormwood, but when the wind blows, it descends like it was shot by an arrow. A person cannot comprehend its true meaning without understanding its tactic. However, someone who cannot take instructions well will also not be able to enter the correct mood.... If the person wished to learn this martial art, it depends on the top, middle and bottom of the whole body to be in harmony, and the hands and legs to work in unison. If encountering an opponent, one’s movement must be ahead to do what has to be done.”

The two Zhang brothers were stumped and they asked at the same time, “What does it mean?”

Hence, Li Jinfeng deciphered the meaning of the text and shared his interpretation to them. Zhang Xiaohua’s head was bent as he pondered, “These words, it seemed that squad leader He had mentioned them to me before but I can’t remember them clearly.”

However, how much did Zhang Xiaohua actually remembered?

Zhang Xiaohu praised, “It is really good to have this fist martial art manual, it’s like having a master by your side teaching you whenever you want.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not say anything, he continued to look downwards while deep in thought. He then raised his head towards Li Jinfeng and asked, “Elder brother Li, I want to learn to read, do you think you can you teach me?”

Li Jinfeng felt strange, and when he looked at the hopeful expression on Zhang Xiaohua’s face, he asked, “Xiaohua, why do you suddenly want to learn to read?”

Oh, is it to read this manual on your own?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, “That’s right, elder brother Li. Since you pursue literature, you may not know that finding a martial arts instructor is very difficult. Furthermore, my own aptitude towards martial arts is very poor, and my understanding towards all the martial arts I have learnt are broken, so I doubt there will be an instructor who is willing to teach me. If I want to continue pursuing martial arts, then I can only rely on myself. However, I cannot read the words on this book, and it will be bad if I trained something wrong. Hence, I wish to learn how to read from you, do you think that this is possible?”

Li Jinfeng said, “It is no problem, Xiaohua. Anyway, you will be nurturing your injuries for a long time on this bed, I gave that manual to you to relieve you of your boredom. If you can read, not only will you be more knowledgeable, you can also pass your time more meaningfully, so it is killing two birds with one stone, how can I not agree? However... ..”

Zhang Xiaohua asked anxiously, “However what, elder brother Li.”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s anxiety, Li Jinfeng smiled and said, “There is no problem teaching you how to read, we can begin in a short while. The reason why is said however was because if we rely only on this fist martial art manual, we will be breaking down many walls on our own. Nothing can be compared to having a master teach you personally, after all, the master would have gone through the same experience you will go through when learning this fist martial art. As the saying goes, “practice makes perfect”, without a teacher who had gone through the learning process, won’t we be at risk of going astray?”

“Going astray? Then what can we do?” Zhang Xiaohua was at a loss.

Zhang Xiaohu who was at a side said, “It is alright, Xiaohua. You can learn how to read first, and read this whole Erlang fist manual, then compare it to your own understanding and slowly experience the differences yourself. As for heading towards doom, I will look around for a martial arts instructor or somebody for a good idea to keep you safe.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Second brother’s idea is really good. Okay, I will learn how to read now.”

Zhang Xiaohua was so happy that he forgot his situation and moved his body,

“Ouch” A heart-drilling pain emitted from his hand and Zhang Xiaohua involuntarily yelped out.

Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng quickly walked to the front of the bed but they did not dare to touch his injured arm, so they pressed down on Zhang Xiaohua’s body and said, “Be more careful, do not move anyhow. If your fingers grow twisted, you won’t be able to learn martial arts anymore.”

Thus, while Zhang Xiaohua was nursing his injuries on bed, he embarked on his journey to learn to read. Li Jinfeng was a good teacher, he was also excited to take on such an old student and would visit every other day causing Zhang Xiaohu to get sick of him quickly. Of course, this was all in good nature, as the other party had kind intentions and did not ask for school fees to teach his younger brother. However, he shifted his area of training to the field where spectators would crowd around because of his unique method of training, which was ridiculous to him.

On that day, Zhang Xiaohu was feeling jittery after he finished his training in the field when someone ran over and told him that third master Qu had instructed him to go to the martial arts school division for a while. Zhang Xiaohu was initially surprised, but it soon turned into happiness as he guessed it should be the news of his acceptance to the martial arts school. Thus, he quickly thanked the person who carried the message, packed his stuff and went to the back courtyard.

Third master Qu house was at the front of the martial arts division courtyard, and it was similarly exquisite in design. At that moment, third master Qu was speaking to Yu Deyi, and he said, “Deyi-ah, how are your internal injuries?”

Yu Deyi replied, “It has more or less recovered thanks to uncle Qu’s concern.”

Seeing the rosy expression on Yu Deyi, third master Qu nodded his head and said, “This path of training inner energy requires one to be patient and humble to improve slowly. Your personality has always been rash which I afraid would be an impediment to your progress. The saying goes, “Learning martial arts is being better person”, if you want to improve your martial arts, you will be have to seek improvement within yourself first, or it would be easy to collect water with a rattan basket?”

Yu Deyi quickly nodded his head and said, "Thanks uncle for his pointer."

Third master Qu then continued, "Deyi-ah, you were in the wrong by challenging Zhang Xiaohu to a match, the latter is only a newly recruited delivery hand and no matter how good his martial arts or aptitude is, it would still be far from your level, so why can't you put aside the other people's glory? Even if it is fine if you wanted to humble him in case he turns proud, but must you use inner energy during the match? This is a huge mistake in exchanging pointers and is looked down upon in Jianghu, fortunately it happened within the confines of the escort station so outsiders will not know of this matter. If not, your reputation would be adversely affected, you will have to be more mindful of this in the future."

Yu Deyi's face turned red and he said, "I was not intending to fight like that, I just lost myself in the match and conveniently activated the purple sand palm. You also know that I have practiced the purple sand palm for twenty years so it has been ingrained as a habit so I would use it unintentionally at times."

Third master Qu said, "Okay, this might be reasonable, but I think that this Zhang Xiaohu is also an interesting person to be able to force you to activate your purple sand palm, I wonder how far he can achieve in martial arts? Oh, what do you think of this person?"

Yu Deyi pondered for a while before saying, "From our exchange, I can tell that he indeed has some real ability since he had reached this level of understanding in the sixth fist not long after he began training in martial arts. However, without any inner energy to complement his fist martial arts, he is like a tiger without its teeth and is not threatening to me at all. If I were to judge properly, he would be as defenseless as an infant whether comparing in speed or strength once I activated my inner energy."

Third master Qu scrunched his nose and said, "He is naturally not your match, you have learnt the purple sand palm which has been passed down in your family since young, and have trained in it for decades so it would be strange instead if you were defeated by him. Fortunately that palm of yours was taken by his younger brother, he would have died if you have struck his chest and you would also be in serious trouble because of that. Even though deaths do not matter much in Jianghu, you won't be able to pass off a murder in Pingyang city under

broad daylight. Even if you can get away with it, wouldn't it bring your father quite some trouble?"

Yu Deyi quickly stood up and said, "Deyi understands this, thanks uncle for your pointer."

Third master Qu stroke his beard and said, "Fortunately you managed to retract your inner energy in time before striking his younger brother, even if you had suffered internal injuries, they are not irreversible so it is a tolerable loss."

At that moment, a strange expression appeared in Yu Deyi's face, he said, "Uncle Qu, while I did pull back my inner energy, I would not have sustained such internal injuries if it was just me pulling back the inner energy alone."

"Oh?" Third master Qu also felt strange and he asked, "Was there something else that happened?"

He then slapped his head and said, "Oh right, how could I have forgotten, this younger brother of Zhang Xiaohu could already lift five hundred jin when he came over during his brother's test. When his fist impacted your body, it must have impacted your control of your meridians."

Yu Deyi had reservations in his heart and he said, "That's right, when that force collided with my palm, it frightened me almost to death. However, if it was just pure physical force, I would not have sustained such internal injuries when I retracted my inner energy back into my meridians."

Third master Qu patted his shoulders and said, "You do not have to worry about this anymore, his younger brother's hand is already crippled and he won't be able to practice martial arts anymore. He would also not be able to create waves in Jianghu just based on that abnormal physical strength, but it is still a pity. However, I have heard from the people in Huanxi mountain villa that his aptitude in martial arts is worse than ordinary people, and he could not even master a single complete fist martial art after learning from someone by the name of He Tianshu for over a month. Now that his hand is crippled and he cannot train in martial arts anymore, it may not be a bad thing for the boy, and perhaps you have done a service for him."

Yu Deyi was not fully convinced and he asked, "How can a person's aptitude be so poor? His elder brother is a genius too."

Third master Qu smiled as he said, "I have heard this from a Piaomiao sect disciple who was with them so the news should be accurate. I initially thought that he was a rare talent that could be nurtured so I was feeling quite upset, but..."

Just as he was speaking, the door was knocked and third master Qu asked, "Who is this?"

A voice replied, "I am Zhang Xiaohu, third master Qu. You have told me to come."

Upon hearing the reply, third master Qu exchanged glances with Yu Deyi and replied, "Zhang Xiaohu-ah, come in quickly."

Zhang Xiaohu then entered the room and was slightly surprised when he saw Yu Deyi, he first greeted third master Qu before greeting the latter.

Yu Deyi hurriedly returned the greeting and said, "Zhang Xiaohu, it has been quite a few days, how is your younger brother's injuries? I have been tending to my internal injuries for these past few days as well so I did not go over, I hope you are not offended."

Zhang Xiaohu quickly replied, "Not at all, my younger brother's recovery is going well. The pain he is feeling is not as bad as the first few days so I think he would recover soon, young master Yu does not have to worry. How is young master Yu's body?"

Yu Deyi smiled and said, "Thanks to your concern, I have gotten better day after day and finally could leave my room to come over here today."

Third master Qu continued, "Yes, Yu Deyi has been telling me his wrongdoing for the past while. However, Zhang Xiaohu, blades do not have eyes so I hope you can forgive him."

Zhang Xiaohu replied, "Third master Qu, young master Yu, please do not worry, my younger brother and I understand this, Zhang Xiaohua especially. He bears no ill-will at all, not to mention if he will forgive you or not."

"Hahaha" Third master Qu laughed and said, "Zhang Xiaohu, you and Yu Deyi will be the pillars of Lotus escort's future and there will be many times when both of you have to work together. Thus, I am very happy to see the both of you

reconcile so quickly.”

Zhang Xiaohu and Yu Deyi also laughed at their sides.

Then three men then took their seats.

Third master Qu said, “Zhang Xiaohu, the reason I asked you to come over as to let you know that I have settle the matter on Huanxi mountain villa’s side, your younger brother will be able to continue working over there for as long as he likes no matter what he wants to work as, I have used my old face to get this bargain for him.”

Zhang Xiaohu quickly stood up and said, “Thanks third master Qu for his help.”

After Zhang Xiaohu sat back down, the other party continued, “We shall let your younger brother nurse his injuries in the escort station, and he can return after his injuries have mended. The other matter relates to you, I have already discussed this with old sixth Li. Tomorrow, you can come to the martial arts school to receive instruction, but you will still have to complete your tasks that have been allocated to you from the delivery division. You will still need to leave if your job calls for it, otherwise on normal days, you can go to the martial arts school, what do you think of this?”

Zhang Xiaohu was overjoyed and he said, “I have inconvenienced third master Qu.”

Third master Qu smiled and said, “That is nothing much, I am fortunate enough to have found a martial art talent like you in the escort station, our station will have to rely on you young people in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohu and Yu Deyi quickly responded, “We do not dare, it is thanks to elder’s directions.”

Third master Qu then said some sentences of politeness to Zhang Xiaohu before instructing him to return.

However, just as Zhang Xiaohu got up from his seat, he said to third master Qu, “Third master Qu, there is still another matter, I am not sure if I should let you know.”

Third master Qu smiled and said, “It’s no problem, just share it.”

Zhang Xiaohu said, “My younger brother is currently bedridden so he may be bored and would like to read some fist martial arts manual, but I do not know where to get these for him. I heard that there are some manuals in the library, may I borrow some for him to read?”

Third master Qu bent his head and pondered before saying, “This is possible, if the child is so studious, we should support his interest. I shall write an instruction slip now for you to take away and you can borrow as he pleases. However, you must let him know not to spread it outside, understood?”

Zhang Xiaohu was even more ecstatic as he took the slip from third master Qu and thanked the latter sincerely before walking away in high spirits.

Chapter 100: Borrow book

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Borrow book

Yu Deyi was left together with third master Qu, he was confused and asked the elder, “Uncle Qu, why do you treat him so well? You even let him borrow the manuals in the library.”

Third master Qu smiled and said, “Have you seen the manuals in the library?”

Yu Deyi replied, “No I have not.”

Third master Qu asked again, “Then why did you not?”

Yu Deyi was puzzled as he answered, “Why would I need to look at them? Aren’t there already instructors in the martial arts school, if I understood something wrongly, it could lead to my death in a real fight. Oh, I understand now, uncle Qu, indeed it is “the old ginger that is spicier”, to exchange a favor from Zhang Xiaohu with martial art manuals that no one would use.”

Third master Qu smiled and said, “That’s right, Deyi-ah, you have to think more in situations like this and not judge a book by its cover. I brought him into the martial art school because I wanted to win him over, and he would naturally be grateful to me. Furthermore, for someone like him without any foundation to enter the martial school, do you think it is possible for him to pick up a profound inner energy cultivation method? Won’t he still have to follow me in the future?”

Yu Deyi smiled back and said, “I understand now, uncle Qu. If he would listen to you in the future, you will impart to him profound inner energy cultivation methods, if not, you can casually find someone else to teach him an average inner energy cultivation method, since something like that is still extremely precious to a person like him.”

Third master Qu smiled in satisfaction and praised the younger man, “Not bad, you are ‘a student that can be taught to understand.’ However, you have missed out on two details. Firstly, whether he learns a profound or average inner energy cultivation method, this Zhang Xiaohu will never be able to achieve anything greater and he will continue to be under our escort station’s control. Secondly, his younger brother is already crippled and cannot learn martial arts anymore, even if we give the latter the inner energy cultivation manuals to read, he will not be able to practice them, not to mention the most common fist martial arts manuals.”

An expression of shame appeared on Yu Deyi’s face as he said, “Uncle Qu, this little nephew had not thought this far, you are really a genius.”

Third master Qu stroke his beard and enjoyed the compliment as if his name was “Deyi (proud)”.

How would Zhang Xiaohu know all these? He was only concerned with making his younger brother happy, as long as the latter was busy, he would not brood too much about his injury.

The collection in the library was very rich, there were all sorts of manuals for weapons, and many other more manuals. Naturally, the fist martial arts make up most of the manuals, they actually occupied an entire shelf by themselves. When Zhang Xiaohu’s eyes swept across them, he was surprised and elated, there were at least a hundred of these manuals, if this was just the collection of the station, how many of these manuals have been passed down in Jianghu in all? He was really looking at the sky from his little well before; even though his aptitude was fairly good, stones of another mountain may serve to polish jade, he would have to come over and browse if he found the time in the future. With so many fist martial arts, it would be more than enough for his younger brother to pass the time until his injuries are healed. However, Zhang Xiaohu was still slightly upset, if his younger brother knew that he would not be able to learn martial arts after his injuries have recovered, would the boy still bother about these fist martial arts manual?

After seeing so many fist martial art manuals, Zhang Xiaohu was unable to choose from them. However, after pondering for a while, he took the first book from the top, it did not matter which book he chose since it was just for Xiaohua

to relieve his boredom, anyone would do and even if it was not okay, he could simply take another one by one. Haha, but looking at the shelf full of manuals, Zhang Xiaohu's head subconsciously hurt as he involuntarily shook his head, why were there so many?

After taking out the fist martial art manuals, the supervisor in the library made a record on a book, he did not ask any question and simply waved Zhang Xiaohu away.

With a pile of manuals in his chest, Zhang Xiaohu hummed a tune as he took light steps and walked back to his room.

Upon opening the door, the first sentence he heard was Li Jinfeng telling Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, it is not that I am trying to praise you, but you are really really smart. I suggest that you drop the idea of pursuing martial arts, what is so good about it anyway? Isn't it just fighting and killing every day, and not living a single peaceful day for the rest of your life? Instead, you can just read books and pursue literature, may be compose some poems in the comfort of your room, wouldn't that be nicer?"

Zhang Xiaohu thought it sounded absurd and he asked, "Gentleman Li, what is the matter?"

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu enter the room, Li Jinfeng pulled the former's hand excitedly and said, "Zhang Xiaohu, help me persuade your younger brother, he is still a child, why should he go through so much misery just to learn martial arts? With just his intellect, if he studied seriously for two years, it would be easy for him to achieve good grades in the official exam and pursue a political career. Don't you think that will be a better path for him instead?"

Zhang Xiaohu felt like his head was covered in perspiration as he asked, "Xiaohua is very smart? Why did I not know that before, I watched him grow up since young but no one had ever called him a genius. If he was smart, our father would have sent him to school already."

Li Jinfeng's brow wrinkled and said, "I do not know what Xiaohua was like when he was young, but perhaps his talent matured as he grew older?"

Zhang Xiaohu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he said, "Can you explain more clearly, I do not know what the situation is so how can I persuade him?"

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, "I've been too hasty, haha, you have not been around all these while when I was teaching Zhang Xiaohua how to read. At the beginning, he's picked things up like a normal person, but he got faster the more he learnt and has managed to finish reading this fist martial art manual during this period. Furthermore, if you look at his calligraphy, even though he wrote with his left hand while sitting on the bed, it still looks neat and his rate of improvement is amazing. This kind of talent is hundred times better than mine, it will be a waste if we don't send him to school."

Zhang Xiaohu felt his heart moved and he picked up the words that Zhang Xiaohua wrote. Indeed, the words he used to see that were of different size and comparable to crabs crawling on sand has been replaced by neat characters in tidy rows. Hence, he said to Zhang Xiaohua who was sitting on the bed, "Xiaohua-ah, it seems that you have great potential in scholarly pursuits, even though we did not uncover it when you were young, you are still not too old so why don't you go to school instead? If you can become an official and bring glory to our household, I am sure that father and mother will be very happy then."

Zhang Xiaohua was not moved and he said, "No way, second brother. Teacher Liu and Liu Kai are both educated people but when sister-in-law was bullied, would they be able to help her? Since I have already embarked on the path of martial arts, I will stick through it all the way, don't you agree elder brother Li, that if one always take detours he will not be able to accomplish large things?"

Seeing that he had already made his mind up, Zhang Xiaohu did not try to persuade anymore. As for Li Jinfeng, his eyes turned bright as he thought secretly, "This person is obviously a rare literary talent, even his rejection sounds so sophisticated, how can I let go of him? Haven't the physician said that Zhang Xiaohua would not be able to train in martial arts anymore, I only need to concentrate on teaching him and wait until he realizes the truth, then won't he come back to the scholarly path?"

As he was thinking, his eyes rolled and said, "Okay, Xiaohua makes sense. However, you must train in martial arts to strengthen your body and not to partake in all the fighting and killing in Jianghu. You must also not forget to inform this elder brother Li if you ever want to back to the scholarly path."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Alright, at that time, I will definitely look for

elder brother Li to study. However, I think that elder brother Li will be disappointed.”

Li Jinfeng smiled as he said, “Then let me be disappointed, the higher the expectation the greater the disappointment, so I will not expect too much. Now that you can read many words, and have read the fist martial arts manual, I will bring some of our books from the library for you. Even if you are not pursuing the scholarly path, there will still be benefits reading these books.”

“Really? Then I thank elder brother Li in advance. Bring some tomorrow morning for me to look at, I have been reading this fist martial art manual for the past few days until it has lost all its flavor.” Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed when he heard Li Jinfeng’s offer.

Li Jinfeng was like an angler who just caught a fish, he said, “Since you are bored of this fist martial arts manual, I will bring some interesting books that you definitely won’t want to put down tomorrow.”

He then looked at the sky and saw that it was late so he packed his things and bid farewell.

After Li Jinfeng left, Zhang Xiaohu looked at Zhang Xiaohua lovingly and said, “Xiaohua, I did not expect you to have some much talent in scholarly pursuits, I think you should consider gentleman Li’s proposal seriously. Living a peaceful life in the future makes quite a good choice.”

Zhang Xiaohua frowned and said, “Second brother, why are you so naggy today, I have never been good at studying since young and even the teacher had said so. I don’t know what is happening now, perhaps elder brother Li was saying all that just to cheer me up. However, I have never considered studying, so does second brother have something in mind?”

“Cough” Zhang Xiaohu broke into a fit of cough and he quickly changed the topic, “I do have something to tell you.”

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised and he asked, “What is it, second brother, have you learnt to keep people in suspense?”

Zhang Xiaohu mysteriously took out the manuals from his breast and said, “Look at these, what do you think they are?”

Zhang Xiaohua received them and studied carefully, he said, "Isn't this Erlang fist manual? Second brother, where did you get this from?"

"Erlang fist?" Zhang Xiaohu was surprised and he quickly took the manual back for a closer look. Indeed, there was a large "Er" written on the cover, it seemed that he was too preoccupied with taking a manual that he did not look at the manual he took carefully enough. He felt embarrassed for actually missing out the word "Er", it was really scary being illiterate in this world.

The library supervisor was at fault too, why didn't he read the title of the book out, Zhang Xiaohu thought as his face turned red.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's curious gaze, Zhang Xiaohu explained the events in the afternoon. When Zhang Xiaohua heard of the opportunity his second brother was given, his eyes brightened as though there were numerous stars in them, and he said loudly, "Second brother, I worship you, you are my eternal idol, thank you."

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's excitement, Zhang Xiaohu could not help but feel happy himself, but he also said, "Let's forget about this first book, I will exchange another one for you immediately."

Zhang Xiaohua quickly dissuaded him, "Don't exchange it for now, second brother. You just borrowed it out and if the supervisor sees that you return it so soon, he will be unhappy and may not let us borrow anymore. First place it here for tonight and you can exchange it for another one tomorrow."

Zhang Xiaohu was left with no other choice so he said, "Alright, I will return it the first thing in the morning."

After that, Zhang Xiaohua excitedly prodded Zhang Xiaohu on the library, and Zhang Xiaohu had no choice but to describe it in detail. Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed as he listened and he said, "That is great, second brother, I will definitely read all the fist martial art manuals in the library at least once."

Zhang Xiaohu thought of the whole shelf of books and he could not bear to dampen his younger brother's mood so he said, "Alright, I will support you, Xiaohua."

Suddenly, Zhang Xiaohua asked, "Second brother, did you see any inner energy

cultivation manuals inside?”

Zhang Xiaohu shook his head and said, “I can’t read so how would I know which manual is an inner energy cultivation manual? This manual was also referred to me by someone else. However, I do not think that they will let me look at the inner energy cultivation manuals or borrow them out, I believe that they will keep it in private.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded when he heard his brother’s words, how could a precious thing be easily brought out?

Zhang Xiaohu casually left the Erlang fist manual on the bed.

After dinner, Zhang Xiaohu continued to train the sixth stance patiently under the oil lamp light while Zhang Xiaohua looked at him in boredom. He felt strange, wasn’t this just the sixth fist martial art, there were only the same few stances so what could he do with them? Yet his second brother was treating it like a treasure as he practiced it over and over again, sometimes fast and other times slow, was this really effective? Zhang Xiaohua felt suspicious.

When he was bored to the max, Zhang Xiaohua casually picked up the fist manual on the bed and flipped through it under the weak lamp light. Suddenly, he shouted “Ah” and his hands stopped on a page of the manual. When Zhang Xiaohu who was practicing his martial art heard the sound, he quickly turned around and asked, “What’s the matter, Xiaohua?”

“Oh, second brother, I saw something weird.” Zhang Xiaohua explained, “Bring your oil lamp over.”

Zhang Xiaohu brought the oil lamp over as he was told and Zhang Xiaohu continued to study the page he stopped at, he then took the other book which Li Jinfeng brought over and flipped to the same page, compared the two carefully and nodded. He said with certainty to Zhang Xiaohu, “Second brother, look at this. This is the stance I managed to memorize in book which you borrowed from the library, and this is the same page in the book Li Jinfeng brought. The second one looked more powerful and the fist is punched slightly lower which is the same as my mistake, but the one I remembered is more powerful than your book.”

Zhang Xiaohu rubbed his chin and wrinkled his brow, he said, “What does this

say? Fist martial art manuals will have mistakes, and even martial arts masters will make mistakes. In that case, the Erlang fist that is spread throughout Jianghu could also be different among different people?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, “Second brother, what you say makes sense, and this fist martial art has been down for a long time so it must have changed greatly as well.”

Zhang Xiaohu said, “That’s right. Even though the more obvious things won’t change, details like this have probably been changed many times.”

“Hahaha.” Zhang Xiaohua laughed aloud.

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised and he asked, “Have you gone crazy, why did you laugh like that?”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed as he said, “Second brother, squad leader He said that my martial arts were wrong and he would often tell me to change this or that but I could not change my posture no matter how hard I tried. Now that I see it, as long as the main stance is correct, the small details do not matter too much. If I were to analyze this even more, then it is not necessary for whatever squad leader He taught to be the right way, don’t you agree?”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head and said, “You are not wrong, then, you are prepared...”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “I think that for my future practice, I will follow what I can remember, as long as the stance looks similar, then I will not bother about the minor details.”

Zhang Xiaohu slapped his head and laughed, “That’s right, you can’t correct yourself even if you tried, so why bother trying right, you are just giving yourself an excuse.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, “Maybe.”

The knot in Zhang Xiaohua’s heart was finally dissolved, he slowly flipped through the fist martial art manual to try and memorize more stances. Actually, he had already tried this before with the manual Li Jinfeng brought, and even though he managed to remember quite a bit, he forgotten everything but the two original stances on the second day, just like when he was in Huanxi

mountain villa. Hence, he did not dare to believe Li Jinfeng when the latter praised him for being smart, his memory was one in a million poor, it was good enough if he was not called mediocre, how would he dare to pretend to be smart, it would be really embarrassing if someone exposed him one day.

However, when talking about receiving tutoring from Li Jinfeng, Zhang Xiaohua was still proud of himself. Just like how Li Jinfeng said, he had actually managed to memorize everything, and his left hand had grown more proficient in writing. However, as Zhang Xiaohu had said, he was already above ten years old so there was nothing to be proud of when learning the stuff for younger children.

Just as he was preoccupied with his thoughts, he suddenly heard a “Putong” sound, Zhang Xiaohua raised his eyes and it was Zhang Xiaohu who fell onto the floor. He immediately yelled, “Second brother, what is the matter?”

To suddenly fall while training martial arts was not likely to be something good, could he have gone astray in his martial arts?

Zhang Xiaohu jumped back up like he was chased by an alligator and his body was still upright with no sign of fatigue or abnormalities. He patted off the dust on his body and said, “I am alright, Xiaohua.”

Zhang Xiaohua sighed in relief.

Zhang Xiaohu explained, “When I was practicing up a certain move, I felt like there was some gap in front of my fist and suddenly recalled what you just said, that perhaps this fist stance was wrong. Hence, I extended my fist slightly further to fill the gap but just as my feet were about to switch to the next stance, my waist twisted and I lost my balance, haha, and that was how I fell.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard his explanation, he raised his thumb and said, “Second brother, you are a genius. Since ancient times, you are the first person who can practice martial arts until you trip yourself, even though there may people who will follow in your footsteps, you can be the founding father of this move.”

Zhang Xiaohu “belched” and said, “Your oily tongue has gotten slimier.”

Zhang Xiaohua retracted his smile and said solemnly, “Second brother, what I said previously was only my conjecture, you cannot take it too seriously. This

sixth fist and Erlang fist has been spread around for so many years and the number of people who practiced it is uncountable, there must be a reason for each and every stance. If you change the stance, you may end up forfeiting your life in a fight. Furthermore, everyone follows their own path in martial arts, when I first saw you practice sixth fist to the extreme, I also wanted to follow you because of how amazing you were. Not just me, there were probably others in the escort station who wanted to follow in your footsteps, but if I can't even remember the Rohan fist to its entirety, how can I only train in one martial art?

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head slightly as he listened.

Zhang Xiaohua continued, "Hence, your path is not suitable for me and vice versa. I change the stances because I cannot remember the original ones, but you don't have to. This sixth fist has been practiced to death by you, why change now? Furthermore, you don't even know where to begin modifying it!

Chapter 101: Reading book

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Reading book

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head as he pondered in silence before he returned to his practice. He trained especially slowly this time but Zhang Xiaohua was still not relieved and he watched for a while as the former continued his practice smoothly. After a while, he felt that his second brother was training in his usual way so Zhang Xiaohua let go of his worry.

He put his attention onto the fist martial art manual in front of him. However, after he looked for a while, his vision began to blur and he soon entered his sleep. Ever since he got injured, Zhang Xiaohua sleeping patterns had been brought up earlier and he would have fallen asleep before the night was full, probably because his body was weaker and he needed the rest.

Within his dream, a vibration from unknown origins appeared in his left hand and spread across his body.

Within his dream, the lights continued to flicker.

On the next day, Zhang Xiaohua woke up and the first thing he tried to do was recall the Erlang fist which he burned into his head the night before. Unfortunately, he was disappointed again, but perhaps because he was so used to disappointment, he patted the two fist martial art manual beside him with no change in the expression on his face.

After his breakfast, Zhang Xiaohu brought the Erlang fist manual which he borrowed previously as he went out, and not long after, “teacher” Li Jinfeng came to visit. He asked a little about Zhang Xiaohua’s condition, then mysteriously brought out a thick book from his breast and smiled “evilly” at Zhang Xiaohua as he said, “Xiaohua, guess what good thing did I bring today?”

Zhang Xiaohua felt a bad premonition on what was to come, he said, "Elder brother Li, I don't think that thing is anything good."

Li Jinfeng placed the book in front of Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Here, look at it, what does it say on the cover?"

Zhang Xiaohua read the top of the book and he vaguely recognized the words "Words explanation". Feeling puzzled, he asked, "Does it say words explanation? What kind of book is this?"

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, "This book is what we scholars must have, it is the foundation of foundations, look at it yourself."

After finishing his sentence, Li Jinfeng flipped opened the "Words explanation" book to a random page and said, "Look, Xiaohua, there are many words on each page, and there is also a short explanation on its meaning and usage beside. This is a necessary tool for us scholars, I suggest that you memorize it from the first page to the end, so that you won't have any more difficulties recognizing a word."

The pitiful Zhang Xiaohua looked wearily at the tiny words that were squeezed together and thought again to how thick the book was, he felt a stab of pain in his head and said, "Elder brother Li, must I memorize every single word inside? I don't think a normal person can do this, no wonder everyone respects scholars like you, this is amazing."

Li Jinfeng smiled happily and said, "Hehe, that is moulding an iron bar into a needle, not everyone is able to do so. However, I have faith in your abilities, and it is definitely not a problem for you."

Zhang Xiaohua pushed away his praise and said, "Elder brother Li, look, I am not going to be a scholar, can you compromise a little, this thing is too heavy, how will I be able to finish learning it?"

Li Jinfeng shook his head firmly and said, "No way, if we are doing this, then we will be doing the best we can and start from a professional angle. Furthermore, this book is very basic and is especially suitable for you, I have thought of it the whole night before choosing this thing for you, so you must not let me down."

Zhang Xiaohua looked at Li Jinfeng enthusiastic vigour and he flipped open the

“Words explanation” bitterly to its first page. After listening to Li Jinfeng’s explanation, it seemed that the man had begun to implement his “nurture the genius” plan.

However, was this not the so called “chasing a goose to its slaughter”?

“Words explanation” was actually a dictionary so there were naturally many words in it, just the first page had twenty words and each word was explained in detail, would a page have four to five hundred words by putting them altogether? The Zhang Xiaohua who was recognized as a genius by Li Jinfeng thus spent the day memorizing until his head hurt. The book was not a fist martial art manual, there was no pictures and stories which would make reading it enjoyable, and not long after, Zhang Xiaohua could not bear it anymore. He wanted to learn to read so that he could understand the fist martial art manuals, and not because he wanted to sit for the official exam, so why must he go through so much suffering?

However, Li Jinfeng’s words made him regain his motivation, he said, “Are you still an immature, insensible child? If you can’t even understand these things, how would you be able to understand all those abstract martial art manuals? The last time you read the fist martial art manual, I was by your side explaining the paragraphs to you, if you were to read a fist martial art manual that is completely unfamiliar to you, would you have to confidence of comprehending everything, while bearing in mind that even the lightest mistake can lead you astray. Are you still sure that you do not want to undertake this elementary course?”

Zhang Xiaohua had never been enlightened by someone else by this much before, and he was speechless. In order to practice his martial arts, in order to save the commoners who need defending, and to help the fellow Jianghu peers who are in deep water or fire, he could only straighten his thinking and bury his head into his studies again.

Unfortunately, a person’s ability is limited. Zhang Xiaohua had studiously endured for an entire day, and even when Zhang Xiaohu returned and stealthily placed another fist martial art manual on the bed, Zhang Xiaohua had no time to look at the new material, and up till Li Jinfeng returned back to his quarters with a large smile on his face, Zhang Xiaohua could not complete memorizing even

the entire of the first page.

Zhang Xiaohua was feeling emotions of dejection and anxiety, learning these words was much more difficult than practicing martial arts, no wonder the people in Jianghu were so carefree, those who did not endure this type of patient suffering would not be able to go through such an exercise.

When Li Jinfeng left, he was a hundred and twenty percent satisfied, a child who had started from nowhere and only learnt to read a fist martial art manual to learn three to four hundred words from the “Words explanation” in one day was nothing short of a miracle. Furthermore, he had full confidence in Zhang Xiaohua’s memorization ability, as long as he had remembered the word, it would be his forever and he would not forget it the second day. Thus, he could just check the results of that day’s learning on the next day.

Just thinking that a seed with mysterious potential would be nurtured and bloom under his care made his footsteps seemed lighter already.

After Li Jinfeng left, Zhang Xiaohua was feeling mentally exhausted and he laid on the bed to rest. Suddenly, he recalled that his second brother had brought back a fist martial art manual, and his eyes immediately opened and was fully of vigour.

As he picked up the fist martial art manual that was laying on the bed, then looked out at the dark sky through the window, Zhang Xiaohua could read clearly the three words on the manual’s cover “south branch fist”, oh, he had never heard of this fist martial art before. He flipped open the fist martial art manual and read it slowly from the first page. Fortunately, there already seemed to be results from Li Jinfeng’s teachings, even though he had just a read a day’s worth of book, there were many words in the manual he could read. As for those he did not understand, he could refer to the pictures and guess their meaning. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua became engrossed as he read the book from the head to its end, and after he was done, a small figure seemed to appear in his head which was demonstrating martial arts according to the stances he just read. Zhang Xiaohua was hit with a wave of surprise, this martial art manual was such a good thing, the only problem was even though Zhang Xiaohua knew the rough movements of the fist martial art, he was unaware of the details to be careful of. He would have to wait for Li Jinfeng to return before explaining his interpretations of the

paragraphs before he might understand. Furthermore, Zhang Xiaohua's body was still injured so he did not know if the memory in his head was accurate, and that he could learn a fist martial art without any guidance from a master.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua was in a dilemma, even though he was afraid of Li Jinfeng to return and force him to read the book, he was also anticipating the latter to come back sooner to explain the fist martial art manual.

When he woke up the next day, Zhang Xiaohua would try to recall the martial art he learnt the day before out of habit. While he had no expectations for himself, the result gave him an unexpected surprise; he actually managed to remember every single step of the south branch fist that was playing in his head. Zhang Xiaohua's mouth was open wide, his forefathers had finally blessed him to have given him a chance to break out of his "bottleneck". Zhang Xiaohua was somewhat at a loss for words to describe his joy and wonder.

And the next question that naturally came next was, what was the reason?

Could it be that the heavens gave him a chance because of his injuries?

If it was so, Zhang Xiaohua was willing to be injured every single day.

But the Erlang fist manual was also read after he got injured, why could he only remember the original two stances?

Zhang Xiaohua was at a complete loss of the situation.

However, he soon had no time to ponder all these as Li Jinfeng had arrived again, and thus, Zhang Xiaohua began his second day reading the "Words explanation".

The second day was just as tough as the first one, he still could not finish a page by the time the day was up. However, the reason was because he asked Li Jinfeng to explain the south branch fist to him. Even though Li Jinfeng did not know martial arts, his ability to understand text could not be underestimated, the latter explained every sentence line by line while Zhang Xiaohua nodded. By the time they finished the book, the sky had already turned dark and the food brought over by Yu Lun had been reheated over and over again by Zhang Xiaohu. The two Zhang brothers warm-heartedly invited their visitor to stay, and Li Jinfeng did not stand on the ceremony as he ate while chatted happily with the

brothers.

When Li Jinfeng left, Zhang Xiaohu was still training his martial arts in the room while Zhang Xiaohua lay on his bed while he ran Li Jinfeng's previous explanation through his mind. It was as clear as his original impression, and he wondered, could this be his way of martial arts?

Zhang Xiaohua thought hard about it in his head.

However, Zhang Xiaohua had a suspicion in his head, the way this martial art flowed in his head was different from his previous interpretation; and his original impression had a little figure of him practicing the martial art in a livelier and more personal way, whereas the second one was like an impersonal shadow practicing the martial arts and it seemed to have lost its charm.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua tried to apply the same trick to combine his interpretation of the south branch fist with the earlier thirty random stances from different martial arts to see if he could find another perfect link. However, he soon realized that he was wrong, this south branch fist martial arts seemed to be a complete martial art on its own and it did not mix well with the other martial arts.

This, what on earth was this?

Zhang Xiaohua turned to look his second brother who was training his martial art and wanted to call the latter over to ponder it with him, but he suddenly recalled Zhang Xiaohu falling down the previous day so he extinguished the thought. Better not to pull his second brother in and create impediments to his training.

On the next day when Zhang Xiaohua woke up, he ran through his memories as usual. He searched up and down and the result was a pleasant surprise, Li Jinfeng's explanation was still in his memory without any change or part that was missing. It was like a treasure that was put in a carriage, when Zhang Xiaohua recovers, he would slowly practice the martial art stance by stance.

Zhang Xiaohua quietly teared in joy, the heavens had been kind and he was no longer a useless person.

In the morning, Zhang Xiaohu who had to leave as usual to do his delivery hand

chores and attend classes in the martial art school noticed the joy and tears on Zhang Xiaohua's expression and he asked, "Xiaohua, what is the matter? Why are you like this, had your injury worsen? Is your arm hurting again?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "It is nothing, second brother, my injury does not hurt as much as it used to so I think that it is recovering well. I have already read this fist martial art manual; can you exchange it for a new one for me?"

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised, he asked in disbelief, "Have you really finished it?"

He then seemed to have remembered something and said quickly, "Alright, it is fine. I will borrow another manual for you immediately."

Zhang Xiaohua felt as though his second brother had misunderstood him and he said, "Really, second brother, I have finished reading it. You can exchange it for another one."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "Alright, I will bring a new one over in the afternoon."

After finishing his sentence, he kept the south branch fist manual in his breast and walked out of the room smilingly.

Not long later, the cute and respectable teacher Li Jinfeng came over again, this person did not seem to be going to school at all since he had come over to teach Zhang Xiaohua every day, causing the latter to feel depressed. Your occupation is to study, not to come and teach me so often, were you bullied by your own teacher until you ran away and came over to vent your frustrations on me.

However, Li Jinfeng seemed to be sincere in providing Zhang Xiaohua with a good education, so Zhang Xiaohua carefully placed a smile on his face to welcome him.

For the next following days, Zhang Xiaohua was happy while being in pain. On one hand, he was tormented by Li Jinfeng and had to absorb the words in "Words explanation" like a sea sponge, and on the other hand, he was happily going through the fist martial art manuals that Zhang Xiaohu would borrow for him. The many martial arts also flowed as smoothly as a river around Zhang

Xiaohua's sea of memories without a drop of water being left out.

Actually, during his study of the "Words explanation", it was only the first few days that were more difficult because every page contained many new words. However, as he reached the later pages, Zhang Xiaohua realized that the words that appeared in the front would reappear behind quite often. At first, he would learn page by page each day, and he soon picked up his pace and went through two, three or even five pages a day. Zhang Xiaohua finally got the knack, this "Words explanation" did not have a wide vocabulary, the new words were explained with the same vocabulary of words, and by the time Zhang Xiaohua learnt this vocabulary, he could learn the newer words with ease.

By that moment, Zhang Xiaohua made major improvements in his reading of the fist martial arts manual. While he needed Li Jinfeng to explain the paragraphs in the beginning, it went on to Zhang Xiaohua reading on his own and asking Li Jinfeng on the words he did not recognize, and finally to relying completely on himself to read all the passages in the manual. Furthermore, there was a limit on the types of words he would encounter in the fist martial art manuals, after seeing them appear repeatedly, he naturally could understand their meaning after a while.

Thus, Li Jinfeng did not have to go over every day, he would visit Zhang Xiaohua once every other day, and this made the latter feel relieved. It was naturally unpleasant to have someone urging by one's side while reading, and while Zhang Xiaohua liked to read, he still preferred to read what he wanted in his own leisure.

Zhang Xiaohu had already begun to partake in the lessons in the martial arts school. By this time, perhaps due to Zhang Xiaohua's influence or from his own enlightenment, stones from another mountain may serve to polish jade so he began to broaden his horizon and learnt other martial arts from the martial arts school instructor.

Third master Qu was overjoyed in the change in Zhang Xiaohu, the former had been in Jianghu for long so his accomplishments and understanding in martial arts were naturally high and profound. When he agreed to let Zhang Xiaohu enter the martial arts school, it was to further mould Zhang Xiaohu's talent in martial arts and allow the latter to build his own path. While the depth of

understanding in martial arts was important, one's breadth in the different forms of martial arts were equally important, and third master Qu had been wracking himself over how to persuade Zhang Xiaohu to learn martial arts. Now that the problem had solved itself, third master Qu was naturally happy at the result.

Zhang Xiaohu's honest demeanour and realistic expectations for himself also gained him the praise of the other people in the martial arts school, only the supervisor in the library had some discontentment with him. Everyone who borrowed fist martial arts manual from the library would consider deeply before borrowing, and they would take at least half a month to digest its contents before returning them. However, this Zhang Xiaohu would borrow a new book each day, did he think that he was a "golden lotus"? The fist martial art manuals on the shelf have been borrowed from top to down, left to right daily, causing the library supervisor to create a new record each time he came, did he think that the supervisor had nothing else to do?

Hence, this library staff went to raise this matter to third master Qu. When the supervisor entered the room, Yu Deyi was also in the room with third master Qu. The supervisor was cautious and he first asked third master Qu while looking at Yu Deyi, "There are some matters in the library that I have to raise to third master, I wonder if it is appropriate for me to share them now."

Third master Qi nodded and said, "It is fine to say them, Deyi is a relative of mine so there is no need to withhold anything from him."

The supervisor immediately bowed towards Yu Deyi with an apologetic smile, and Yu Deyi returned the greeting with a nod.

The supervisor said, "This matter is not big, but I feel that it is strange and am afraid that it was part of something larger so I thought that it would be more appropriate to report it to third master."

Third master Qu wrinkled his brow and said, "Don't beat around the bush, just tell me what it is."

The supervisor quickly replied, "Yes, around twenty days ago, the delivery hand Zhang Xiaohu took a permission slip from you to borrow fist martial arts manual from the library."

Third master Qu was surprised, he said, “Oh yes, about this matter. What was wrong, did you not lend it to him?”

The supervisor smiled politely and said, “Third master, you have wronged me. He only borrowed the fist martial art manual, but did you grant him any other request?”

Third master Qu wrinkled his brow again and said, “What is the problem? Did he ask for any ancient text from the secret stash?”

The supervisor replied, “Third master must be joking, the books in the library is sorted by this little person and there is not a single manual in inner energy cultivation method, how could there be any ancient text?”

Yu Deyi interrupted, “Uncle is not joking with you, just tell him what is the problem concerning Zhang Xiaohu?”

The supervisor answered, “There is nothing wrong with the manuals Zhang Xiaohu requested to borrow, but he would borrow a new one each day. On the morning of the second day, he would return the previous manual and exchange it for a new one, and he did not pick the manuals with careful prior consideration, but instead went from top to down and left to right. This... this seems to be illogical right.”

Chapter 102: Memory

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Memory

Third master Qu and Yu Deyi were both surprised and asked, “You said that Zhang Xiaohu would borrow a book each day, and return it the next morning before borrowing a second one? And he did not look at the titles when he borrowed the manuals?”

The supervisor nodded his head in agreement.

Third master Qu pondered for a moment but to no avail, he waved his hands and said, “Forget it, I will find a day to ask him about this. You only need to record the books he borrowed, and the first martial art manuals and weapons martial art manuals inside the library are just ordinary techniques. Since he is now part of the martial art school, there is no problem letting him read them. You have done well in informing me of this matter, just be careful in the future. You can leave now.”

The supervisor was pleased with the compliment and he left feeling happy.

When the supervisor left, third master Qu asked Yu Deyi, “What do you think of this?”

Yu Deyi smiled as he said to third master Qu, “Hasn’t uncle Qu already got an idea, why do you still need to ask me?”

Third master Qu smiled slightly without saying anything.

Yu Deyi continued, “Zhang Xiaohu probably borrowed those fist martial art manuals for his younger brother to read. Even though his younger brother has inborn strength that is greater than ordinary people, he is unable to practice martial arts now and those manuals are just for him to satisfy his curiosity. We

can just let him read them, because even if he read all the fist martial art manuals in the library, how can these common martial arts in Jianghu give rise to another top martial art exponent? If it was that easy, then wouldn't the supervisor have more profound martial arts than anyone else? I might have still believed that Zhang Xiaohu's younger brother was learning martial arts if he borrowed a book once a month, or at least seriously pondering on martial art techniques, but if he were to borrow a new book each day, then wouldn't that mean that he is just flipping through the manuals casually to pass the time? I would imagine him lying on his bed in the room, flipping through the pictures and not understanding the text inside the manual as though he was reading a comic."

Third master Qu smiled and lifted up his thumb, he said, "Deyi-ah, your improvement in analysing the situation is not small this time. You have done well to join all the clues together."

Yu Deyi said humbly, "Uncle is too kind with his words, I just felt that the signals were wrong and that the supervisor was being too suspicious. This supervisor is also not bad to be meticulous like this."

Third master Qu asked, "Deyi, you are absolutely correct, what is the most important thing in Jianghu? Information. Information can be more critical than the best martial arts."

The two men exchanged glances and laughed in unison, it was true that bamboo shoots do not sprout far from its parent.

However, were they right?

Not necessarily!?

What was Zhang Xiaohua doing?

He was currently feeling frustrated from the many complete fist martial arts swimming around his head.

It was actually funny to think about it then; not long ago, Zhang Xiaohua was frustrated at himself for not being able to memorize a single fist martial art from the head to its end, but right then, his situation had made a complete U-turn and he was frustrated from having learnt too many completed fist martial arts.

While his initially intention was to learn as many martial art stances as possible before linking them together to form his own perfect sequence, now that he had collected so many complete fist martial arts sequences, how was he going to link them all up together?

It was such a pain.

The Zhang Xiaohua of that moment had almost recovered from his injuries, the throbbing pain from his arm had almost subsided completely and he was now sitting on the bed staring blankly at the ceiling. Another fist martial art manual had already been covered and was left carelessly at a side.

Zhang Xiaohu was still absorbed in his training; it was even a case of fist not leaving the hands and tune not leaving the mouth.

After not being able to come up with a solution despite a long period of pondering, Zhang Xiaohua had no choice but to give up on this idea for the time being. Instead, he redirected his attention to Zhang Xiaohu who was training his martial arts in the room. Suddenly, his heart shook in surprised and he cried out, "Second brother, why aren't you training in the sixth fist anymore?"

When Zhang Xiaohu heard Zhang Xiaohua called him, he stopped his practice and wiped off his sweat before smiling to the latter, "I have stopped practicing the sixth fist since a few days ago, it's just that you have not paid any attention. I was moved by the previous words you said, and while I do not plan to train in other martial arts to the same extend as I did for the sixth fist, I think it is fine to include them as part of my learning."

Zhang Xiaohua said happily, "Second brother's martial arts have reached another level again. I'm so jealous, my fist martial arts are stuck at the same level and it's driving me wild with frustration. Oh right, the fist martial art you were practicing seems quite familiar, it looks like the south branch fist."

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised, he asked, "How did you know?"

It then dawned on him, "Oh, you have read this martial art's manual."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, "The second manual you passed to me was the south branch fist, my impression of it was naturally deeper because of that."

Zhang Xiaohu said, "There is an instructor in the martial arts school who is proficient in this south branch fist, and I have heard him said that this south branch fist has many defensive moves but few offensive moves, hence I look for his instruction to try it out."

"Oh, so it is like this." Zhang Xiaohua said as he pondered, "Second brother, can you perform the fist martial art from its beginning all the way to the end slowly, I would like to see it."

Zhang Xiaohu replied, "Of course, watch carefully."

After saying his sentence, Zhang Xiaohu went into the opening stance and began to perform some of the moves, then said, "How is this speed?"

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brow and said, "Be slower."

Hence, Zhang Xiaohu decreased his speed even further as he displayed the south branch fist again.

However, Zhang Xiaohua's wrinkle between his eyebrows became more furrowed and he had an expression of confusion on his face after Zhang Xiaohu finished his demonstration.

Zhang Xiaohu could not help but asked, "What is the matter, Xiaohua, was my demonstration not the same as the fist martial art manual?"

Zhang Xiaohua said in puzzlement, "Second brother, it is not that they are dissimilar, but because they are exactly the same."

Zhang Xiaohu felt strange and he asked, "What is wrong with being exactly the same?"

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Second brother, I actually do not understand as well. Do you remember when I used to learn martial arts from other people, my martial arts will seldom be the same as the other person, and it is because there are some differences between my memory and what the other person taught, but how can the one I learnt from the fist martial art manual be exactly the same as the fist martial art manual? I keep having a strange feeling about this."

Zhang Xiaohu said, "Your way of learning of martial art is strange, everyone wants to learn to be as close as possible to the martial art but you are the

opposite. So what was your intuition?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, “I don’t know either. In short, I just feel as though there is something wrong.”

“Mm, then let the wrong remain wrong, we can continue to discuss this tomorrow. It is already quite late now so you better go to bed soon.” Zhang Xiaohu said impatiently and he did not put Zhang Xiaohua’s words to heart.

When Zhang Xiaohu extinguished the oil lamp, Zhang Xiaohua still had no intention of sleeping, his eyes were wide open in the darkness as he searched in his head for the source of his intuition until it was close to midnight.

For the next few days, Zhang Xiaohua still did not find out the source of his gut feeling so he placed it aside and concentrated on memorizing the fist martial art manuals and painstakingly read the foundational studying material “Words explanation”. Under Li Jinfeng’s brilliant plot, Zhang Xiaohua could already read this “most basic” studying material without any help and he had finished half the book. Li Jinfeng was secretly smiling while sitting beside, if this was made known to other scholars in the school, wouldn’t they become so embarrassed that they would jump into a well? However, should Li Jinfeng jump into a well too? Of course not, if not for his strategic planning, how would this servant unleash his full potential? Li Jinfeng had made a huge contribution for his role.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua had been relying on his own ability these days to read the “Words explanation” book. Li Jinfeng even gave Zhang Xiaohua additional work by making the latter read several books he brought from school while shamelessly saying. “All these are elementary reading materials for children.”

When Zhang Xiaohua retorted that he had not seen children from Guo village reading those books, Li Jinfeng would always laugh coldly and said, “Guo village has its own education standard, and Pingyang city has our own education standard. Why do you think that there are so many people who would do what they can to send their children to study in Pingyang city? It is because the education levels are not equal, Pingyang city has the best education standards, not to mention that we have the most schools and students. All the children that came to Pingyang city will be exposed to better opportunities and materials, this studying material that I lent you cannot be found in other places. Since you have

the fortune to study them, why are you thinking sideways instead of concentrating more on the content? Think back to your youth when you were apathetic towards studying, and think again of the other children who wish to be in your shoes, do you still not want to study seriously after this?”

Zhang Xiaohua was struck down by these words, he felt as if he was truly “despicable”. Thus, the boy who did not study in his childhood was moulded under Li Jinfeng’s strict discipline and he became more hardworking in his studies, just like the story of Tou Yuliang who would prick his leg to keep awake and study.

One will get back what he paid for, Zhang Xiaohua managed to obtain spectacular results in this learning environment. Even though he did not take any test to measure his improvement, his daily conversations with Li Jinfeng would include harder vocabulary and proverbs, and the boy who could not read one to two months ago could no longer be found in this new Zhang Xiaohua. On his youthful face was a dazzling and elegant demeanour, the pupils of his eyes would occasionally shine with the light of intelligence, and anyone who met him would think that he was a prim and proper student.

These were only the results of his outer appearance for Li Jinfeng and Zhang Xiaohu who were even more surprised at his achievements in studying the fist martial art manuals. It was ridiculous to even imagine it; in the beginning, Zhang Xiaohu would borrow one new book each day from the library. However, the supervisor was feeling tired and allowed him to borrow two books instead thinking that it would reduce the frequency of his visits. Who would have guessed that Zhang Xiaohu would return again on the next day, the supervisor was speechless but he had already informed third master Qu of this matter and the latter had not taken any action, so he could only count his misfortune and record more on the record book. He would just assume that the previous years were restful periods and this year was a little interest he owed in the past, and no longer complained about it.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohu was puzzled himself. In the beginning, he thought that Zhang Xiaohua wanted to read the manuals seriously and commit himself to memorizing them, after all the latter did discuss the south branch fist seriously with him. However, when he saw that Zhang Xiaohua was only reading the

manuals right before the sky turned dark, and would throw it aside once the oil lamp was lit, how did it seemed like the boy was reading the manuals seriously, it was more like the appearance of a boy reading comics to relieve his boredom.

However, when he thought of the future when Zhang Xiaohua realized his inability to train in martial arts anymore, Zhang Xiaohu would wonder how to comfort the boy?

Just thinking about it made his head hurt.

Time flew quickly, and Zhang Xiaohua's injuries recovered slowly under everyone's care. The physicians would periodically adjust his medicine which inspecting the recovery of his bones, and by the time the weather began to cool, the injury in his wrist was more or less recovered. His palms and fingers were still recovering normally, and Zhang Xiaohua no longer felt pain when he moved his hands occasionally. Under Zhang Xiaohu's meticulous care, Zhang Xiaohua's fingers did not become twisted which made the physician feel satisfied after every inspection. Zhang Xiaohua's injuries were actually very severe, third master Qu had admonished Yu Deyi harshly and if Yu Deyi had not retracted his inner energy, it would not be too far off to say that Zhang Xiaohua's bones would be shattered into smithereens with no hope for mending, and Zhang Xiaohua's right hand would really become crippled for life. Instead, Yu Deyi only borrowed the momentum of Zhang Xiaohua's punch to retract his energy and the twenty to thirty percent of his inner energy resulted in the latter's wrist, palm and fingers to receive multiple fractures, which is why Zhang Xiaohua would still be able to move his hand in the future although he could not exert too much strength with it. If there was too much force, it would definitely cause the fractures to reopen, which is why Zhang Xiaohua could no longer practice martial arts in the future.

Every time Zhang Xiaohua would ask the physician when he could train in martial arts again, the physician's brows would wrinkle and he would ponder for a long while before saying, "Just wait and see, we will know in the future. Perhaps you will be able to train again once the weather completely turns cool. However, you must remember that for the next three to five years, you must not use too much force whether in martial arts or while working or these bones will break again."

When Zhang Xiaohua heard that he could train in martial arts once the weather cooled down, he was so happy that he no longer paid attention to the three to five years' advice, and his mood would lighten tremendously.

Thus, he would wait every day for the weather to cool.

Zhang Xiaohu who was at a side would feel happy when Zhang Xiaohua's injuries recovered more, but the worry of another matter would also temper his mood back down.

It has been almost four months since they left Guo village and they had not sent any messages back to their household during this period of time. When thinking of how worried their parents might be, Zhang Xiaohu's would feel nervous; when the two brothers first arrived, they had no accommodation or living plans so they did not think of writing back to their family, when Zhang Xiaohua's got injured, they would even less want their family to learn of their misfortune, and now that Zhang Xiaohua's injuries have mostly recovered, it should be the right time for them to give their family a peace of mind. However, he had no relatives or friends in Pingyang city, and did not know anyone who would return to Lu town soon, so how could he pass a message back?

As Zhang Xiaohua's injuries turned for the better, his studies also reached a new level. His "great majesty" teacher Li Jinfeng would no longer come over as often, instead, he would appear once every few days to give Zhang Xiaohua several "enlightening" books for him to read, while posing the latter several provoking questions about the previous texts. Apart from reading, Zhang Xiaohua would also practice writing regularly, and he would show his calligraphy to Li Jinfeng and when the latter saw the words that have become more mellow and mature, he would be dumbstruck and stutter some incoherent comments. Zhang Xiaohua would not understand a single word but he took to assume that it could not be anything good, and elder brother Li did not want to say it too blatantly, so the former would only put in more effort into his studies.

Unknown to Zhang Xiaohua, Li Jinfeng's confidence would always take a back hit whenever he came over to inspect Zhan Xiaohua's progress. Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua's rate of improvement, he would lament to the heavens, "Since I am a jade, when will I become bright.....", could this be the so-called genius? This was truly depressing for the ordinary folks.

The thing that made Li Jinfeng most excited or hurt was that the book of “Words explanation” had been memorized by Zhang Xiaohua until the point where it was at his fingertips, what kind of student was this? Li Jinfeng did not dare to imagine, only a crazy bull would memorize the whole dictionary.

When Li Jinfeng inquired on the method Zhang Xiaohua used to memorize the dictionary, Zhang Xiaohua answered the obvious, it was difficult in the beginning but the words behind were mostly already repeated at the front, so he only need to put in slightly more effort, and during the last stage, he would be able to read ten plus pages each day. As Zhang Xiaohua described his learning process, Li Jinfeng would flipped through the “Words explanation” to ascertain that it was the correct book he had given his student.

Of course he was happy that his method of teaching was so effective, he dreamt that if he ever lost his job in the future, he might have a potentially successful career in teaching children.

As for Zhang Xiaohua who was unaware of Li Jinfeng’s thought, he only felt that he had done what normal children in Pingyang city would do so he did not feel any particular sense of achievement, instead, his joy would come from submerging himself deeply in the fist martial art manuals.

All the fist martial art manuals in the library had been borrowed by Zhang Xiaohu, which meant that the entire collection of fist martial art manuals in the escort station had been read once by Zhang Xiaohua. The current Zhang Xiaohua had a hundred over widespread fist martial arts swimming in his memory, and each martial art was complete with no deficient area. Zhang Xiaohua was not let down by his memorization ability during this period, and he no longer would need to try and recall the fist martial art he memorized the night before because he knew that as long as he tried, that little human figure would appear in his head to display the martial art he was thinking of at any time he wished.

Except for not being able to practice martial arts, Zhang Xiaohua was fully contented with the life he had during this period; he had three meals a day and Yu Deyi did not stinge on the meal’s quality or quantity because of Zhang Xiaohua’s recovery which made him changed his impression of the latter. Once in a while, Yu Deyi would go over to visit Zhang Xiaohua who would be pleasant and no longer bore any grudge like in the beginning. Now that he thought about

it, Yu Deyi's accident was truly unintentional and even though the repercussions were severe, Zhang Xiaohua has heard Li Jinfeng said that these men from important backgrounds would often have their own little eccentrics, and at least Yu Deyi was sincere in his apology and actions unlike other certain people, like the Lu town bullies that Zhang Xiaohua would constantly remember.

As a result, Zhang Xiaohua no longer had any misgivings towards Yu Deyi, not to mention that he got to learn many martial arts because of his injuries. Zhang Xiaohua would even laugh in his dreams when he thought about this.

Chapter 103: Visit

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Visit

The weather slowly turned cooler which signalled the arrival of autumn.

Zhang Xiaohua had already read all the fist martial arts in the Lotus escort library but he had not looked at the blade manuals or sword manuals at all. There was one time when Zhang Xiaohu returned the last fist martial art manual and casually took a sword martial art manual, but when he went to the supervisor's counter, he suddenly remembered that he only asked third master Qu for permission to borrow the fist martial arts manual and worriedly look at the supervisor as the latter recorded it down. Who would have guessed that the supervisor did not ask any questions and was only astonished that Zhang Xiaohu borrowed a single manual this time round, causing Zhang Xiaohu to heave a sigh of relief.

However, Zhang Xiaohua did not seemed to have any aptitude towards swords martial arts, after flipping through it more than ten times, he still could not understand its contents which made him puzzled to no end. While he could recognize the words, the sword stances were not too difficult to understand, but he simply could not remember any of the moves, so he threw it aside in the end.

When Zhang Xiaohu no longer went to the library, the supervisor who was always made busy became puzzle at the change and he even felt unaccustomed to having so much idle time.

As for Zhang Xiaohua, he would spend most of his time learning the materials Li Jinfeng brought over and only run through the previously learnt fist martial arts in the middle of the night before he slept.

On that particular day, Zhang Xiaohua was sitting on his bed and flipping

through the books that Li Jinfeng lent him and just as he was about to become absorbed, Zhang Xiaohu pushed the door open and entered.

Zhang Xiaohua happily said, “Second brother, why did you come back so early?”

Zhang Xiaohu’s smile was slightly forced as he said, “After learning fist martial arts at the martial art school for the whole morning, I was feeling slightly tired so, anyway...”

When he spoke up to here, Zhang Xiaohu hesitated to continue.

Zhang Xiaohua felt strange when he saw his brother’s hesitance and he asked, “What is the matter, second brother? Is there something that happened in the martial arts school?”

Zhang Xiaohu bent his head and pondered before saying, “It is like this, Xiaohua. The martial arts school has allowed me to learn inner energy cultivation methods from tomorrow onwards, so they allowed me to come back early to prepare for it today.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard his words, he was elated and almost jumped off the bed. He said, “That is great, second brother, I did not expect the martial arts school to teach you inner energy cultivation methods so soon, congratulations. I thought that you will need to wait for several years, hahaha. Once you have learnt it, you can teach it to me and I will also learn an inner energy cultivation method, just watch as Yu Lun get envious to death of me, I am superman Xiaohua.....”

Even before Zhang Xiaohua finished expressing his joy, he suddenly recalled the expression on Zhang Xiaohu’s face when he entered the room and immediately knew that things were not so simple.

Indeed, Zhang Xiaohu’s expression on his face did not contain any joy.

Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Second brother, what is the matter? You can’t teach it to me right?”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head and said, “Mm, it is like this, Xiaohua. Third master Qu told me today to prepare to learn an inner energy cultivation method tomorrow, and I asked him if I could teach you once I learnt it. However, third

master Qu said that this inner energy cultivation method is a secret within the Lotus escort and only special members within the Lotus escort could learn them. Even if there are many people who are learning martial arts in the martial arts school, there are only a few who gained third master Qu's recognition and are permitted to learn an inner energy cultivation method. Haha, Xiaohua, you may not know this but third master Qu also wanted to pull me into his clique, he hinted to me that I have to join their camp. Although I do not know how this escort station is run, I naturally agreed willingly, after all, everyone needs a large tree to fall back on and I am not foolish enough to reject this olive branch."

Zhang Xiaohua's face was downcast and he said dejectedly, "What secret martial art can it be that it has to be so secretive. Second brother, why don't you teach me secretly instead, I won't tell it to anybody."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly and said, "It would be good if it were that simple. Third master Qu said that inner energy cultivation methods are unlike fist and weapon martial arts, the cultivation of inner energy is not done within one day, only when one has submerged into a deep enough level could they teach it to another person. If I were to teach it to you after learning it recently myself, it would honestly do you more harm than good and you even could be led astray. Once I have achieved the required level, you might already have another opportunity elsewhere. I think that third master Qu's words are very reasonable, don't you agree, Xiaohua?"

Xiaohua pushed his hand and said, "Second brother, how would I know of all these, I have never learnt any inner energy cultivation method before. Forget it, I don't care about any useless inner energy, I have not even mastered by fist martial art yet so we will see again once my fist martial arts catches up to your level."

Zhang Xiaohu was not completely convinced and he asked, "You really will not pester me to teach it to you?"

Zhang Xiaohua laughed and said, "Forget it, just forget it. However, you must still tell me about any enlightenment you gained while practicing, okay?"

Zhang Xiaohu rubbed his chin and said, "About this, third master Qu did not say anything so I guess it is fine."

Zhang Xiaohua clapped his hands and said, "Then this is settled, I am going to see if the inner energy I learn in the future will be better or worse than yours."

Zhang Xiaohu felt his heart sunk and said, "Mm, of course yours will be better, I have a good premonition about it."

Actually, third master Qu had also told some things that Zhang Xiaohu did not share to Zhang Xiaohua. He said that Zhang Xiaohua's right hand was now crippled so he could not hard labour or lift anything heavy in the future, and the meridians in his right palm were probably already destroyed so without complete meridians for inner energy to pass through, how could he practice any complete inner energy? It was probably as good as saying that Zhang Xiaohua could not learn any inner energy martial art in the future.

Hence, apart from training his fist martial arts in the room, Zhang Xiaohu would spend more time sitting on his bed, his palms faced up, his eyes towards his nose and his nose pointing towards his heart as he practiced training his inner energy. Zhang Xiaohua who was watching from a side felt that his brother looked strange and funny, could one really cultivate inner energy by adopting this clay Buddha posture? However, he knew that Zhang Xiaohu had only just began so even if he asked, the latter would not be able to explain it to him so Zhang Xiaohua would watch silently to not startle his second brother.

Actually, cultivation inner energy required peace, one's body to achieve inner peace from within to produce this inner energy, and most students who were embarking on this path would choose to use an especially quiet room to practice. Zhang Xiaohu would use such a room when he practiced in the martial art school, but he was not used to idling so he would continue his practice even after returning to his room. While it was fine if he was staying alone, it was actually dangerous to have someone beside. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua was injured so he could not move around much and disturb his second brother, which is why no misfortunate accident occurred.

On that day, Zhang Xiaohu went to the martial art school leaving Zhang Xiaohua behind on his bed and in the room alone. Just as Zhang Xiaohua was feeling bored, there was a knock on the door, it appeared that Li Jinfeng had come to visit again.

Li Jinfeng was full of smiles as he entered the room, his hands full of books. During this period, he was catching up on his homework and had not visited in a while, so he first asked Zhang Xiaohua after his injuries, and was naturally happy when he heard that the boy had recovered well. Li Jinfeng then discussed on the books he left Zhang Xiaohua during his previous visit, and the latter had read them seriously so the two entered an animated discussion as they spoke excitedly after one another's sentences.

Just as the two men were talking, another knock sounded from the door. Zhang Xiaohua felt strange, the room he was in was his second brother's so there were almost no other visitors, why were there two people who came over today? He raised his voice and said, "Come in."

However, the door was still closed and the person did not enter. Zhang Xiaohua felt even more strange and he shouted again, "There is someone inside, please come in."

The person still did not enter.

Li Jinfeng looked at Zhang Xiaohua before walking over to the door and opening it. He saw a young lady standing outside so he cupped his hands and said, "May I know who is this lady looking for?"

The lady asked curiously, "Have I called wrongly, is this Zhang Xiaohu's room?"

Li Jinfeng quickly replied, "This lady did not call on the wrong room, here is indeed Zhang Xiaohu's room but he is not around today."

"Oh, so it's like this," The lady's expression softened and she said, "Then is his younger brother Zhang Xiaohua around? I am from Huanxi mountain villa, and have come over to visit him."

Upon hearing her reply, Li Jinfeng said, "He is in, Zhang Xiaohua is sitting on the bed. He is still injured and the physician had advised him not to get off during this period, hence he did not come to welcome you in personally. Please come in."

The lady said, "The previous voice belonged to Zhang Xiaohua?"

Li Jinfeng said strangely, "Yes, it was him who invited you in, have you not heard his voice before?"

The lady said, "The voice doesn't seem to be right."

After finishing their short conversation, Li Jinfeng led the lady into the room, and upon seeing the new arrival, Zhang Xiaohua shouted excitedly, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, why have you come?"

After saying it, he tried to jump off his bed.

Qiu Tong hurriedly stepped forward and held his shoulder, she said, "Zhang Xiaohua, do not get off. Your friend said that the physician did not allow you to get off the bed, so hurry and sit back down."

Zhang Xiaohua said happily, "It is fine, elder sister Qiu Tong. I was already playing outside my bed a few days ago, but the physician saw me doing so and said that since this was the last recovery stage, I have to be really careful so he restricted me back onto this bed. I am actually fine now, you see?"

After finishing his sentence, he rotated his wrist and when Li Jinfeng saw it, he quickly ran over and stopped Zhang Xiaohua, saying, "Stop playing around, you can do so a few days later instead."

When Zhang Xiaohua saw that the two people were concerned over him, he laughed happily and sat back on the bed before saying to Qiu Tong, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, this is my enlightenment teacher, he is called Li Jinfeng."

Qiu Tong was curious again and she asked, "Enlightenment teacher?"

Li Jinfeng flushed in embarrassment and said, "Lady Qiu Tong, do not listen to Zhang Xiaohua's rubbish. I am only a scholar who came with him to Pingyang city, and am acquainted with him and his elder brother. I would come over to visit occasionally because he got injured."

Li Jinfeng then summarized how he taught Zhang Xiaohua to read and write, and he finally ended off, "So it is nothing much. Xiaohua is really smart, and I only did the minimum so I really cannot be considered as some enlightenment teacher."

When Qiu Tong heard his explanation, she also felt happy and said, "If you taught Xiaohua to read, then you are naturally his enlightenment teacher, this name suits you perfectly. However, you treat him as your younger brother and he calls you elder brother Li, so the name does not fit right. Oh right, Zhang

Xiaohua, you can already write now, that's amazing. Once your injuries are healed, you must definitely show elder sister your calligraphy."

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua said as he tried to get up, "I use my left hand to write, elder sister Qiu Tong, I can show it to you now."

Qiu Tong was surprised upon hearing his reply.

She quickly said, "It is fine, there is no need to hurry. I can wait for you to show me in the future."

However, now that Zhang Xiaohua had the chance to show off, like he just got a new toy and could not wait to share it with his friends, why would he not want to? After his insistence, Li Jinfeng placed a brush and ink on the bed to let Zhang Xiaohua write a few words, and it was as good as Li Jinfeng's praise so Qiu Tong complimented the boy generously.

This led Zhang Xiaohua to be even happier.

After catching up on the recent events, Qiu Tong stated her purpose for visit, "Third master Qu sent some people a few months ago up to Huanxi mountain villa to explain that you got injured and had to nurse your wounds in the escort station. I wanted to request to the villa master to take you back, but she said that you were originally from Lotus escort, and your own elder brother was here so if she took you back to the mountain villa to nurse your injuries, your elder brother would miss you terribly, so she forbade me to bring you back. Following then, I had certain matters to settle in the south so I came back only recently, and upon realizing that you still have not returned, I took the opportunity that I had business in Pingyang city to come and visit you. Since your injuries are almost fully covered, you can stay here for a few more days to enjoy the medical care before returning back."

Zhang Xiaohua replied apologetically, "Elder sister Qiu Tong as well as elder sister villa master have treated me so well, I only worked in the mountain villa for a month before stopping to nurse my wounds here, I am really unworthy of your concern."

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "It is alright, we all treat you as a cute younger brother, even though the villa master had not seen you before, she is a kind-hearted person and since you already came out to work at such a young age and

even got injured, how can she blame you? Furthermore, that Liu Er came back a month after you got injured so you do not have to worry about the villa's matters."

"Ah?" Zhang Xiaohua said in surprise, "Liu Er came back, then... then can I still go back to the mountain villa? Will you still want me there?"

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "Of course, Xiaohua, third master Qu had already spoken to the villa master so you can come back to Huanxi mountain villa in the future and not look for another place. Furthermore, there are many things to be done in Huanxi mountain villa, the villa master would not want to abandon you simply because of this."

After hearing her words, Zhang Xiaohua patted his chest and said, "So dangerous, I almost became abandoned after getting myself injured. Lucky, I am so lucky."

Qiu Tong gave Li Jinfeng a glance and said, "Fortunately your elder brother Li was here. The current you right now is no longer the same Xiaohua from the past, not only can you read, your calligraphy is so nice, so you will be able to find a comfortable job anywhere. Of course, if you choose to stay in the mountain villa, with the villa master's protection, your life here will be better than anywhere else. If the villa master learnt that you can read, I am sure that she will be very happy. Therefore, you must sincerely thank this enlightenment teacher."

Zhang Xiaohua said seriously, "Elder sister Qiu Tong is right, elder brother Li had treated me very well and I have nothing else today, except that I have no way to repay him now."

Li Jinfeng quickly said, "Xiaohua do not have to feel like this, I have managed to satisfy my dream to be a teacher while teaching you to study, and being able to show off as a teacher in front of other people is an opportunity that you have given me, we do not have to thank each other, and much less talk about the two words "repay"."

Qiu Tong looked over at Li Jinfeng as she thought that this person was quite interesting and unlike the boorish people she was accustomed to.

She said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, why have your voice changed since the time I have not seen you. Your voice used to be thin and high, but now it is

hoarse and deep, can it be that your internal injuries are still not recovered yet?”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he raised his head to speak in a higher tone. “Ah, ah, ahhh.....” feeling puzzled, he said, “There is not much change, elder sister Qiu Tong.”

Qiu Tong smiled and said, “If there is no change, how can I not recognize your voice from outside?”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and said, “The physician from the pharmacy said there were no internal injuries, and Yu Deyi said that his inner energy did not enter my meridians, so only my hand was hurt.”

At that moment, Li Jinfeng interrupted, “About this, lady Qiu Tong, a young man’s voice would change when he reaches around ten plus years of age. The voice he has in the past is called child voice, and it is sharper, whereas Xiaohua’s voice is currently changing so it will be hoarse. After some time, his voice will begin to stabilize and it will no longer be as high-pitched as before. However, Zhang Xiaohua’s voices sounds pretty nice now, like there is some magnetic quality to it.”

Qiu Tong smiled and said, “Teacher Li is so knowledgeable, even these things are within your understanding.”

Li Jinfeng flushed slightly and said humbly, “These are all written in the books, I am merely saying what was written and combined with some of my own experience, so I do not dare to claim credit.”

Upon seeing his reaction, Qiu Tong’s impression of the man moved up another notch.

Qiu Tong asked again, “Xiaohua, when can your injuries recover? Let me know so that I can prepare, and the next time I come over to Pingyang city for business, I can bring you back to Huanxi mountain villa at the same time.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a moment before replying, “Actually, I can go back right now. However, the physician will probably say no, so I think another ten days should be fine.”

Upon hearing his reply, Qiu Tong said quickly, “Alright, then I will come over ten days later to fetch you. There are many things that the villa requires to send

people to Pingyang city, even if I do not come, there will be someone else to pick you up then.”

Li Jinfeng said, “Lady Qiu Tong, it is not certain when Xiaohua’s injuries will recover, so why don’t we wait for him to recover first, and by that time his second brother and I can send him over, that will also save you the effort of fetching him back.”

Qiu Tong thought that his suggestion as reasonable so she said, “Alright, if I am able to leave ten days later, I will come here to fetch you. If not, the both of you can send Xiaohua up, and at the same time look around Huanxi mountain villa so you can have a peace of mind of what Xiaohua’s life will be like.”

After talking a bit more, Qiu Tong bid farewell and left, while Zhang Xiaohua insisted on getting off his bed to send her off before watching her leave reluctantly.

After Qiu Tong’s figure disappeared into the distance, Zhang Xiaohua turned back into the room.

When he returned into the room, he noticed that Li Jinfeng did not follow him back and was standing in the corridor in a daze. Zhang Xiaohua shouted, “Elder brother Li, what’s up? Did you spot another familiar face?”

Li Jinfeng then woke up from his stupor and walked over, he smiled to Zhang Xiaohua and said, “What familiar face can there be? This escort station only has martial artists, and none of them would bother to spare a glance at this frail scholar, so how could I make a friend here?”

After finishing his sentence, he supported Zhang Xiaohua’s right hand and carefully helped him up the bed.

Chapter 104: Returning to the villa

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Returning to the villa

Once Zhang Xiaohua sat down, Li Jinfeng laughed gleefully and asked, "Xiaohua, are you close to that Qiu Tong?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Of course, elder sister Qiu Tong was the one who let me into Huanxi mountain villa, so we are naturally close to each other."

"How old is that Qiu Tong? Where is she from? Are there are people in her household? Also, is she... is she engaged?" A string of questions flooded from Li Jinfeng's mouth.

Zhang Xiaohua was stumped, he muttered, "We are close, but... we have only met two to three times. I am not sure of the answers to your questions, why not I help you ask them the next time I meet her."

Li Jinfeng put his finger onto his mouth and said, "Hush, these things are not too appropriate to ask in person. When you have the time, you can discreetly find out about it. Remember not to draw any attention and not to let her know that I asked them."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he asked, "Why? It is obviously you who wanted to know, why do you want to beat around the bush?"

Li Jinfeng put his hands behind his back and looked to the window, he said, "Birds courting through song, on the river originates from the land, to the fair lady, your gentlemanly pursuer has come. Xiaohua, you are still young and will understand once you grow up."

Zhang Xiaohua's forehead was set with perspiration, he asked, "Where did this phrase come from? Why have I not heard of it?"

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, "There are countless libraries under the sky, and I will only get to read from one in my poor life. The sea of knowledge in the world is vast, and only by reading good books continuously can one catch up with the times. The earlier phrase was from a song from a story, you will understand its meaning if you read the book in the future, and even if I explain it now you may not be able to understand yet."

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips but his heart was full of agreement, he had only studied for a few days whereas Li Jinfeng had studied for tens of years, how could his knowledge match up to the latter? The phrase he recited earlier was something Zhang Xiaohua could only take his word for since they were not at the same level.

The two men chatted for a while longer, and Li Jinfeng would occasionally ask Zhang Xiaohua about Qiu Tong whether he was doing it intentionally or unintentionally. Unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua had not seen Qiu Tong since he entered Huanxi mountain villa so he could only share some titbits on the person, yet even these titbits would cause Li Jinfeng to listen attentively and gratuitously. Li Jinfeng suddenly remembered something and asked, "Xiaohua, you have not been in Pingyang city for long, how did you manage to meet Qiu Tong? I have been in the city for much longer than you have, how come I do not have your fortune?"

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua recounted the events that led him to meet Qiu Tong, and Li Jinfeng sighed regretfully, "Such a good opportunity and it was taken by you. If it was me, I would definitely have caught hold of the thief and dragged him to her front."

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips again and said, "If the person was you, then where would I find my rice bowl? Such a flippant fellow, you even want to steal my livelihood. Furthermore, you still want to catch a thief with that body of yours, if not for me that day, you would not even notice when the thief stole your money pouch."

When Li Jinfeng listened to his words, his eyes brightened and he said, "In this case, both Qiu Tong and I met the same thief, and our money pouches were not stolen because of you. It seems that we two share quite a similar fate."

Seeing Li Jinfeng who was smitten in love, Zhang Xiaohua rolled his eyes. If the signs were this obvious, then even Zhang Xiaohua could tell that Lin Jinfeng had a crush on Qiu Tong even if he used his legs to think. However, it was Zhang Xiaohua's first time seeing someone so foolishly hung on love.

If this connection could be considered as fate, then the old moon's red string of destiny would be worthless.

As night came, Zhang Xiaohu returned back and Zhang Xiaohua recounted the earlier events of the day to him. Zhang Xiaohu was happy, he felt as if a stone had fallen off from his heart. Even though third master Qu had promised to settle with Huanxi mountain villa, Zhang Xiaohu would still worry for each day if no news came from the other party about Zhang Xiaohua's arrangement over there. He had also met Qiu Tong before since she was the one who brought Zhang Xiaohua over the first time, and if it was her again, Zhang Xiaohu had confidence in her reliability.

For the next few days, Zhang Xiaohua continued to stay on bed to nurse his injuries but his heart would feel as though there was a cat scratching it. He did not want to stay in bed and could not wait to return to the mountain villa, and even the books that Li Jinfeng brought could not distract his attention. Zhang Xiaohu was also troubled with his own affairs; inner energy cultivation was not like fist martial arts training after all, even after practicing for a long time, he had not yet touched the door of cultivation so he naturally felt restless.

Thus, the two brothers would often exchange glances at each other in the room, and out of boredom, Zhang Xiaohua asked Zhang Xiaohu, "Second brother, why don't I go back to Huanxi mountain villa first, I am already bored to death after staying in the escort station for these few months and not even stepping out of this room once. Anyway, I know a few people in the mountain villa, that place is much larger like our Guo village, while I can also move comfortably now and am not afraid of my bones getting hurt, what do you think?"

Zhang Xiaohu pondered for a moment and nodded, he said, "Might as well, since you are not doing much while staying here, I will go to the pharmacy tomorrow to look for the physician for one last consultation before sending you over. Oh right, I heard that the carriage station makes trips over, so once the

physician finished his check up, we can go to the carriage station and rent a carriage to bring you back.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and said, “Second brother, I heard from Ma Jing that it is not cheap to rent a carriage. I think it is better to return on foot, since I have not moved about all this time, it would be a good opportunity for me to stretch my muscles. Oh right, you can hold on to my first month’s pay from Huanxi mountain villa for the time being, and send it over to father and mother when you find a chance to.” While he spoke, Zhang Xiaohua took out the money from his breast and passed it to Zhang Xiaohu before continuing, “This was the main reason why I came over to look for you, but unfortunately I ended up staying here for a few months, it’s like heaven playing a joke on me.”

When Zhang Xiaohu saw the coins on his younger brother’s little palm, he felt emotional and was at a loss for words, and after a while later, he said, “Xiaohua, you can keep these coins for yourself first. Your expenses will naturally be higher as compared to when at home, and you will be by yourself in Huanxi mountain villa, I cannot be by your side so you will need the money more. Keep the money to buy some things for yourself, our parents at home would also wish the best for you, so just live well and only send some money back after you have taken good care of yourself.”

Zhang Xiaohua persisted and pushed the money into Zhang Xiaohu’s hands, he said, “It is alright, second brother. I cannot leave Huanxi mountain villa as and when I like, and everything there is part of my pay, food and clothes are all provided so what else can I spend my money on? Furthermore, this is my first pay so it has more sentimental value, it should be given to our parents in thanks for raising us. This money represent that I have matured, and is a token of my filial piety to them.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “This Li Jinfeng is not bad to have made you become such a proper man, even your words sound more reasonable nowadays. Mm, since you have said so, I shall keep them and ask someone to remit the money back if there is a chance. However, you have just recovered from an injury so do not over-exert yourself. I have accumulated several months of pay in the escort station, so I will pay for the carriage to bring you back there.”

Zhang Xiaohua objected to his idea, but Zhang Xiaohu was worried for his

younger brother, and they pushed each other back and forth without reaching a conclusion until it was time for them to sleep.

On the morning of the second day, Zhang Xiaohua followed Zhang Xiaohu to the pharmacy to undergo a check-up from the physician. After the physician conducted the check-up and replaced his bandages, he smiled and said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Your bones are growing straight and the recovery is going well, the time it took was also shorter than I expected, it seemed that I have been cruel to you. From today onwards, you can move your right hand as you wish, but you must take note not to use too much force in the beginning, never ever try to carry something heavy with your right hand, and use your left hand dominantly while working. Oh right, you can try to use your right hand to eat more often since it will be good exercise to train its flexibility.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked anxiously, “Then when can I train martial arts again?”

The physician looked at the anticipation in Zhang Xiaohua’s expression, and turned to look at Zhang Xiaohu before saying kindly, “Mm, you can try to move your right hand more, and you can remove the bandages after a few days. During then, you can try to do some martial arts, but remember that the fist martial arts are only to strengthen your body and not for fighting, so you have to avoid exchanging pointers or getting into trouble in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, what was the use of fist martial arts if not for fighting? However, he still nodded his head and pretended to understand.

Zhang Xiaohua was in high spirits as he followed Zhang Xiaohu, his steps were light and bouncy as he tried to move his hands around. Zhang Xiaohu quickly stopped him, he said, “Even though the physician said that you can use your right hand, that is only up to a certain limit. Do not make such forceful motions and try to do less strenuous activities in the beginning, and after a while, you can continue to practice your martial arts. Oh right, I feel that gentleman Li’s words are quite reasonable, why don’t you read more books, perhaps studying will be more interesting?” Zhang Xiaohu said because he had yet to give up on persuading Zhang Xiaohua.

Zhang Xiaohua quickly walked normally but he answered, “Studying is so boring, even though those books are interesting, it is still meaningless to drill

though them every day. I still want to learn martial arts and cultivate inner energy.”

Zhang Xiaohu said, “Sigh, cultivate what inner energy. Not to mention where you can learn your inner energy cultivation method from, even I have been practicing for so long without seeing any results, cultivating inner energy is really too hard.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Second brother, don’t you always say that training martial arts is like grinding a metal rod into a needle, why do you say such dejected words now?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly and said, “But you still have to see what type of metal rod it is, sigh, let’s not talk about it anymore, perhaps you will understand when it is your turn, you won’t believe anything I say for now. However, since you want to persist in martial arts, you must remember to take it slow and adjust according to your limits. Only once the time is ripe, you can continue to pick up from where you left off.”

The two brothers chatted until they reached their room, and at that moment, there was a person waiting outside the door and upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu, he said hurriedly, “Zhang Xiaohu, where did you run off to? Sixth master Li has been looking for you urgently.”

Seeing the person’s hastiness, Zhang Xiaohu did not say much to Zhang Xiaohua before he left, except to stay behind and not go off to Huanxi mountain villa himself.

Zhang Xiaohua initially had the intention to go by himself, but upon seeing the expression of his second brother’s eyes as they stared into his own, he decided to wait obediently in the room.

While he was waiting in the room by himself, a voice came from outside, “Zhang Xiaohua, Zhang Xiaohua, where are you?”

Upon hearing the familiar voice, Zhang Xiaohua excitedly hopped off the bed and replied back even before exiting the room, “I am here, elder brother Ma, over here.”

It was indeed Ma Jing, Zhang Xiaohua’s ex-roommate who had come.

After not seeing his roommate for a few months, Zhang Xiaohua only had feelings of longing towards the other party, even the matter of the foot stench had been left at the back of his mind as he dashed out of the room.

By the time he reached the door, Ma Jing had followed his voice and walked over, and upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua walked out of the room, he was also overjoyed and went over to grab Zhang Xiaohua's right hand. Zhang Xiaohua had already gotten accustomed to using his left hand during this period, so he naturally extended his left hand out which caused Ma Jing to fluster and switch his hands immediately. By the time Zhang Xiaohua recovered his caution towards the other party's hands, Ma Jing had already taken Zhang Xiaohua's hands warmly while his other arm swung naturally around Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders. Zhang Xiaohua could not retract his hand or shoulders, and he heard Ma Jing's warm friendly voice, "Brother-ah, it has been such a long time, elder brother missed you terribly, how come your voice has turned so nice? It is much closer to elder brother's awe inspiring voice now."

Zhang Xiaohua shirked his hands and tried to invite Ma Jing into the room, but Ma Jing continued to hold onto his hand tightly and continued to talk without waiting for his response, "Brother, did you know that on that day, I remembered that you told me that you would wait for me at the guardhouse, so when I did not see you there, I thought that you had already returned. I felt strange because you said you would wait for me, and I even went back early despite little Peach... Oh, so I waited a little longer for you at the door in case you were late and could not find the way back. When I went back to the room, you were not there even up till the next day and I began to miss you. Sigh, brother Xi as well, even though we are roommates, your work can't be pushed on to me right? Without you around, my days were tough and difficult, and I would look at the moon and stars while awaiting for your return, but brother Xi said that you actually hurt your hand, oh my gosh. Fortunately, brother Xi still had some compassion so he did not give me all your work, but my days were still tougher than before, look at how skinny I am now, that is a scar from all my recent sufferings."

Zhang Xiaohua played along with his tone and said, "Elder brother Ma, it has been so difficult on you, this little brother will return the favour and adore you

even more in the future.”

After finishing his sentence, he seized the opportunity and quickly pulled his hands away, but just as it slipped off halfway, Ma Jing grabbed onto it tighter and tears appeared in the latter’s eyes, “Brother, you could tell as well? However, you don’t have to adore me, brother is just a lightning rod for misfortune.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not know whether to laugh or cry, he could only extend his left hand for Ma Jing to grab on while he thought secretly, “I will have to wash my hands at least ten times later, and also practice some movement techniques so that Ma Jing cannot enter half a step within my range.”

Following which, Ma Jing went on to recount all the little affairs that had happened to the group of azure robed little hats servants while Zhang Xiaohua only had one thing on his mind, which was to wash his hands. Thus, Ma Jing would continue to blow his flute to the cow until he finally said his fill and ended with, “Fortunately, a month after you got injured, my closest war buddy cum roommate, Liu Er, came back and pulled me out of the sea of misery. Oh right, you have not seen Liu Er before, come over here, let me introduce the two of you to each other.”

After finishing his sentence, he pulled Zhang Xiaohua’s hands and moved sideways to reveal a short and fat stature. Even though Ma Jing was not tall himself, this fatty was even shorter than him by some, which was no wonder why Zhang Xiaohua could not see him while Ma Jing was talking. Even though this person was not as tall as Ma Jing, his body width was twice as wide as the latter, and when Zhang Xiaohua recalled the food provided in Huanxi mountain villa, he gained some understanding to its reason. Zhang Xiaohua quickly retracted his hands and bowed towards the short and fat Liu Er, “Elder brother Liu Er, I have long heard of your name, and it’s an honour to finally see you in person today.”

Liu Er bowed and returned the greeting, his words were short and direct, “Zhang Xiaohua, nice to meet you, I hope you have recovered from your injuries.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Thanks elder brother Liu Er for his concern, it has fully recovered.”

Zhang Xiaohua then said to the two men, “These two elder brothers, please

follow me and take a seat inside.”

Ma Jing stopped him in his tracks and said, “Xiaohua, it is not early anymore, we did not come just to visit you.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of disappointment as he said, “You are already leaving so soon? Why not sit inside and chat for a bit, and once my second brother returns, I will follow the two of you. My injuries are more or less healed anyway, so I was just about to go back to the mountain villa with my second brother.”

Ma Jing continued, “Mm, we did not come to visit you but to complete some other matters, and bring you back to the mountain villa while we do so.”

Ma Jing emphasized on the word “visit”, and when Zhang Xiaohua caught its meaning, he sighed secretly; this Ma Jing would never change his spots.

Zhang Xiaohua said, “In that case, elder brother Ma, elder brother Liu Er, both of you can wait inside the room while I go out to find my second brother to let him know I will be leaving with you.”

Upon hearing, the two men finally entered the room.

However, after the two men entered the room, Zhang Xiaohua realized just as he stepped outside the door that he did not know where to look for Zhang Xiaohu. There were many people in the escort station, and Zhang Xiaohua was not naïve enough to think that everyone would recognize his second brother, while he had not explored the area enough to have a deep impression. Now that Zhang Xiaohu was called away by sixth master Li, Zhang Xiaohua did not know where the delivery hands would be at so he had no choice but to return back to the room.

Upon returning into the room, Ma Jing asked, “How did you inform your second brother so soon?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, “I have yet to let him know, I do not know where he went so I think I shall pack my belongings first, and at the very worst leave him a note.”

Ma Jing was surprised, he asked, “You can write? I seem to remember that you could not read well.”

Zhang Xiaohua said smugly, “Elder brother Ma, three days of separation and a person may change, not to mention that we have not met for three months, do you think I still can’t write since then?”

Ma Jing said enviously, “Xiaohua, do not lie to your elder brother, no matter how I see it, you don’t seem to be the kind of person who can learn to write in three months.”

Zhang Xiaohua said as he packed his belongings, “Fine then, once I’ve packed my stuff, I shall demonstrate it to you.”

Chapter 105: Waist token

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Waist token

At that moment, the Liu Er who was quiet during the half bell of time spoke up, “We cannot read so how do we know what you write is real?”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he thought, “That’s right, second brother can’t read so there is no use leaving him a note.”

However, he immediately changed his mind, even if his second brother could not read, he could consult someone else, after all, it was not hard for the latter to do something like that.

Zhang Xiaohua did not have many belongings, when he came over several months ago, he had only planned to stay for a while before returning to the mountain villa so he did not bring much. What he was packing now was only a few books and small items which did not take too much time. Hence, under Ma Jing and Liu Er’s gaze, Zhang Xiaohua took out some paper and was just about to search for his brush, he heard someone walking from outside. He turned his head to look and saw Zhang Xiaohu opening the door.

The current Zhang Xiaohua was much more sensitive, when Zhang Xiaohu was walking outside the room, his footsteps were light and the other two men in the room could not hear it, yet Zhang Xiaohua was able to feel it clearly.

When Zhang Xiaohu pushed open the door to enter, he was surprised to see the strangers in his room and Zhang Xiaohua responded promptly by introducing the two new visitors. Zhang Xiaohua then quickly greeted them, “Ma Jing, thank you for taking such good care of Xiaohua while he was in Huanxi mountain villa.”

Ma Jing followed the other part’s action and replied politely, “Brother Zhang does not have to be too polite, Xiaohua is still young and we all consider him as

our little brother, so of course we would take good care of him.”

Only Zhang Xiaohua was feeling disgruntled, he felt that their care was rare and he was “stepped on often by their shoes” instead.

When Zhang Xiaohua explained the purpose of the two men’s visit, Zhang Xiaohu revealed an expression of joy and said, “The two of you have come at a good time, I was planning to send Xiaohua over to the mountain villa today but was called out early in the morning by sixth master Li. It seems that the delivery division requires us to go out today, so I am relieved now that the two of you have come.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard his second brother’s words, he asked anxiously, “Second brother, where is this job of yours headed to? Is it dangerous? This is your first job so you have to be careful.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “I cannot tell you where the exact location is since this is the escort station’s rule, but there should be no problem since my destination is not too far, and this will not be my first time heading there. The escort station had arranged most of the new recruits to this job to train us, and I am even appointed as the deputy squad leader so I doubt there will be any danger. Furthermore, there will be a highly skilled and experienced squad leader who will be leading us for this mission, so you do not have to worry.”

After listening to his words, Zhang Xiaohua gradually became calmer.

When Ma Jing noticed that Zhang Xiaohua had packed his little knapsack but the two brothers were still dawdling around, he said to Zhang Xiaohu, “It is getting late now, brother Zhang, and we still have to be back in the mountain villa by noon so we can’t stay any longer. I shall bring Zhang Xiaohua back with us now, so come and visit us if you have the time in the future.”

Upon hearing the other party’s words, Zhang Xiaohu said, “Brother Ma’s words are right, going back to the mountain villa is an official business so we should not delay anymore. Come, I will send you all off.”

After finishing his sentence, he picked up the small knapsack on the bed and motioned Ma Jing and Liu Er to head off first.

The Huanxi horse carriage was parked outside the escort station entrance, and

it was the same driver and carriage that brought Qiu Tong and Zhang Xiaohua up to Huanxi mountain villa the previous time.

Zhang Xiaohu stood in front of the carriage and looked at his own younger brother, the latter had been living well during this period of time but he did not put on any weight, his face has slimmed a little but his height was about the same. When he looked at the arm which was still wrapped in bandages, Zhang Xiaohu could not help but still feel slightly guilty.

Zhang Xiaohu placed the knapsack onto the carriage and nagged, “Remember what the physician just said, first do some normal recovery exercise, do not ever do anything too strenuous, and always be careful because if your bone breaks again, it will bring a lot of trouble.”

Zhang Xiaohua was already sick of listening to these words and he said, “Alright, second brother, you have already said it many times. Haven’t I told you that the work in the mountain villa is not much, and since I am already accustomed to my left hand, I can still use it if the situation calls. Actually, I want to start practicing martial arts again, but since the physician told me to wait for a few more days, I will listen to his advice.”

Seeing the Zhang Xiaohua was already getting impatient, and feeling that he had repeated it enough, Zhang Xiaohu smiled and nodded before saying to Ma Jing and Liu Er, “Xiaohua injuries may have recovered but the physician had instructed him not to fully use his right hand yet, I hope that you will take good care of him when you are all in the mountain villa, and I thank you advance for now.”

He bowed deeply after finishing his sentence.

Ma Jing and Liu Er quickly bowed back and voiced their agreement.

The three men got onto the carriage and the carriage began to move. Zhang Xiaohu stood in front of the station entrance while waving his hands continuously until the carriage disappeared into the distance, while Zhang Xiaohua looked on until he could no longer see his second brother before turning his body back to the carriage.

During their journey, Ma Jing would grab onto Zhang Xiaohua and question him incessantly, when he heard Zhang Xiaohu cautioned Zhang Xiaohua to not

practice martial arts, he was puzzled in his heart as he recalled the latter saying that he did not know martial arts when he first arrived. How did he know martial arts now?

When Zhang Xiaohua was learning fist martial arts from He Tianshu in the mountain villa, he did not deliberately avoid Ma Jing and the rest of the servants. However, the azure robed servants with little hats and the Piaomiao disciples belonged to two different worlds, apart from eating together and other small interactions, they would not intervene into each other's businesses during the majority of the time. The azure robed servant with little hats would even have a sense of inferiority and so they would not intervene in the Piaomiao disciple's practice, but Zhang Xiaohua was not aware of all this. While he would work and eat with Ma Jing and the rest, his other spare time would be spent with He Tianshu and his group, so Ma Jing was completely unaware of the matter of Zhang Xiaohua learning martial arts.

Now that Ma Jing had asked on that day, Zhang Xiaohua naturally explained everything to the former clearly. Ma Jing felt strange, and even a sense of jealousy despite not saying so, he secretly felt that with his own aptitude and suaveness, how could He Tianshu not notice him instead? Could it be jealousy? Or perhaps he had luck to blame, and perhaps he should show some goodwill towards the Piaomiao disciples during breakfast tomorrow instead?

After learning that Zhang Xiaohua could perform some fist martial arts stances, Ma Jing wanted to know how the former got injured in the escort station, and when Zhang Xiaohua recounted the whole events of that day, Ma Jing immediately extinguished the thought of learning martial arts for himself, and quickly kept back the idea of showing any goodwill. Instead, he will have to be more scathing towards them tomorrow, what a joke, what fist martial art can he learn, the boy had practiced for over a month yet he could hardly perform a few strokes and was beaten close to death. If he had learnt martial arts, although he would definitely outperform Zhang Xiaohua, wouldn't the other party also beat him close to death with just a palm thrust?

Ma Jing thought over Zhang Xiaohua's words, the latter's second brother Zhang Xiaohu who was ten times better than him still got beaten up by Yu Deyi until he had to pick up his scattered teeth all over the floor, at least he was

intelligent enough to not walk the path of martial arts. Hence, he patted himself in the back secretly and felt proud for choosing the path full of budding opportunities through wearing azure robes and little hats.

The simple and honest Liu Er who was sitting beside them only listened quietly and smiled occasionally to show his agreement.

After a while, the horse carriage reached Huanxi mountain villa and it entered through the back door as usual.

When the carriage stopped at the back door, Ma Jing and Liu Er did not enjoy Qiu Tong's privileges of not requiring to show their waist token or being able to bring a stranger in, they honestly took out their waist tokens and handed it over. When the guard look towards Zhang Xiaohua, the latter got flustered and slapped his forehead; when he went out of Huanxi mountain villa several months ago, he drew a waist token which had to be returned upon coming back, but where was the token now? After not using it for so long, Zhang Xiaohua had forgotten its whereabouts. When he was studying with Li Jinfeng, he seemed to have used it as a paper weight, but he did not pay attention to it while he was packing his knapsack earlier.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua unbundled his knapsack. This thing, although it was easy to tie up, untying the knot was hard! Zhang Xiaohua's left and injured right hand had to put in much effort, so Ma Jing who was sitting at a side naturally took it over to help untie the bundle, and once it was finally opened, Zhang Xiaohua searched hard and messily for the item. Indeed, it was wedged among the books, so Zhang Xiaohua picked it up and passed it to Ma Jing.

Ma Jing did not mind the delay and he casually looked at it before turning around to hand it over to the guard. Just as he extended his hand, he suddenly recalled something and with a "Ah" gasp, he retracted his hand and inspected the waist token, studying it from up to down and left to right, before frowning and asking, "Zhang Xiaohua, why is your waist token different from ours?"

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he took back the waist token for a closer look and said, "This is the right one, I only have one waist token. This should be the one I got the previous time I left the mountain villa, do you mean that this waist token does not belong to our mountain villa? Oh no, then have I lost the correct

one?”

Ma Jing was also astonished, he said, “This should also be from our mountain villa, it looks similar to ours and I seemed to have seen it somewhere before.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked, “What? Are there many types of waist tokens in our mountain villa?”

Ma Jing said patiently, “Yes, depending on the job that you do, each person’s waist token is slightly different, just like when we went near little second Nie and the rest... oh, now that I think about it, when little second Nie first came here and he followed me to Pingyang city, his waist token was also like this. At that time, I even took our both waist tokens and placed them side by side to compare, no wonder your waist token also looks familiar, how did you get this type of token?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, “Elder brother Ma, isn’t this my first time taking a waist token, how would I know the reason? Why don’t you ask the guard instead?”

When Ma Jing heard his reply, he felt that it was reasonable and so he passed the waist token back to the guard. When the guard received it, he inspected the token, made a record and kept it. At that moment, Ma Jing put on a shy visage and went forward to ask, “Excuse me elder brother guard, I have a question.”

The guard nodded.

Ma Jing asked, “Elder brother guard, can you tell me why my little brother here was given this type of waist token?”

When the guard heard his question, he laughed heartily as though he saw an idiot before replying in return, “How would I know, I am only in charge of making sure that the tokens are genuine and putting them back into the villa. As for who should receive which token, I do not care at all, you will need to ask the person who gave the token this question!”

Ma Jing was unhappy when he heard the answer, wasn’t this the same as saying nothing at all? However, he did not dare to reveal his unhappiness and put on a fake smile to thank the guard.

The guard did not say anything else and waved his hands to motion the

carriage to enter, while he thought secretly, “I know that you are unhappy even if you thank me in word, why did you ask me without preparing your heart anyway.”

The carriage carried the three men to the entrance of their courtyard before setting off elsewhere.

When Zhang Xiaohua alighted from the carriage, he was greeted by the familiar scenery. Time had flown past and having not been seen this place for several months made Zhang Xiaohua felt many complex emotions. When he first came here, Zhang Xiaohua was still as naïve as a toddler with regards to the foreign surroundings. A month later, Zhang Xiaohua had gone in and come out of the door countless of times, and the empty space beside the door was where he would sweat buckets while practicing the tens of styles of fist martial arts. Now that several months had passed again, he had brought his injured body back to the same spot.

With his knapsack slung onto his back, Zhang Xiaohua followed Ma Jing and Liu Er into the courtyard. The time was already noon but the others had not returned yet so the courtyard was quiet. Zhang Xiaohua was slightly absentminded as he followed the two men into the room, and he causally threw his knapsack onto his original bed before sitting down on it. However, he soon realized that Ma Jing was looking at him strangely, while Liu Er also gave me a weird stare before breaking into laughter. Zhang Xiaohua was astonished, he bent his head to look at his body and then at his feet, did he step onto dog poo? It didn't seem to be the case.

When he raised his head again to look at his surroundings, he immediately jumped off the bed. The bed already had a new set of bedsheets and the small table where things were kept had been changed. Zhang Xiaohua then remembered that before he came to the mountain villa, Liu Er was sharing the room with Ma Jing and since the other had returned while he was absent, Liu Er would naturally take his own original spot again. Zhang Xiaohua had not noticed all these and made a fool of himself again.

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned red and just as he was about to explain himself, Liu Er quickly cut in, “It is alright, Zhang Xiaohua. You can rest on the bed first if you are tired, you will still need to pay more attention to your health since you

just recovered from an injury.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of gratitude; such a good person was rare among the azure robed servants with little hats.

Liu Er continued, “If you are used to this bed, I will go and find brother Xi to arrange another room for me so that you can continue to stay with brother Ma.”

Zhang Xiaohua woke up like a ray of lightning had just struck him, he anxiously motioned his hands and said, “Don’t, a gentleman does not take the object of someone else’s love, since this is elder brother Liu Er’s original bed, I naturally have to give way. It is better if I find another room instead.”

Liu Er said, “I am fine with sleeping anywhere, but you are a patient so it is best to place you somewhere you are more familiar with. The power of familiarity cannot be underestimated, and it will aid in your recovery.”

Thus, the two men pushed and pulled as both wanted to let up the bed to the other party, while Ma Jing who was watching from his side became moved, such kind people! Perhaps his personality was so kind that it had rubbed off his roommates.

Just as the two men were giving way to each other, noisy voices came from the courtyard which probably signalled the return of brother Xi and the rest.

Zhang Xiaohua happily ran out of the room, presumably not to escape from Liu Er’s generous heart, but because he wanted to see his fellow “field comrades” whom he had fought with for a month together. When Zhang Xiaohua appeared in the courtyard, the other azure robed men in with little hats became puzzled and they surrounded the former to question him incessantly. Actually, Zhang Xiaohua was not so close with all of them, and he did not even manage to enter their circle during the month he was there. However, after several months of being apart, everyone’s feeling was fresh again, and furthermore, they heard that Zhang Xiaohua was injured in a fight and almost lost his life so they were naturally curious. Someone asked, “Zhang Xiaohua, I heard that you picked a fight with some expert in the Lotus escort, causing the person to lose his temper and slapped you half dead, is that true?”

Another person asked, “Zhang Xiaohua, I heard that you fought continuously with twelve opponents before reaching close to death after your last victory, is

that true?”

Someone even asked, “Zhang Xiaohua, I heard that you were *** by a mistress in the Lotus escort who even used the Yinyang harmony to break apart, this makes you our idol. Oh right, how was that mistress?”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard their questions, his head spun dizzily from all of their queries and even though he wanted to answer them one by one, he suddenly lost all his strength to even say a word so he simply smiled in reply.

Tian Zhongxi was standing outside the circle quietly while his thoughts were a mystery. After everyone was finished with their questions, he straightened his face and called out, “Everyone get back. Since Zhang Xiaohua has returned, you will have the time and opportunity to ask him whatever you want in the future. He is still not fully recovered, and you will have to compensate Zhang Xiaohua if he gets injured by one of you carelessly.”

His words were effective, the azure robed little hats crowd immediately distanced themselves from Zhang Xiaohua so even if the latter fell down, they would definitely not be implicated.

Tian Zhongxi said again, “Quickly pack up and get ready to eat. There are still many things to do after lunch, don’t blame me for docking your pay if they get delayed.”

These words were even more effective, who would want their pay to be docked? Everyone immediately scattered back to their own rooms and the lively atmosphere vanished in a puff of smoke.

Upon seeing the Zhang Xiaohua who was still puzzled from the sudden disappearance of the crowd, he said, “Zhang Xiaohua, follow me.”

After finishing his sentence, he walked back to his room without waiting for a reply.

Zhang Xiaohua felt strange when he saw how Tian Zhongxi had treated him so coldly but it was not a good time to ponder on the reason. Upon seeing Tian Zhongxi about to enter his own room, he quickly ran over to chase after him.

When Tian Zhongxi entered the room, he turned around to see Zhang Xiaohua ran after him and said in an even voice, “Zhang Xiaohua, how are your injuries?”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the other party carefully and said, "It is alright, brother Xi. Even though I have not fully recovered, I can still use my left hand to work, and it won't affect any work that is allocated to me."

Tian Zhongxi said, "Haha, I do not care about this. I am relieved since your injuries are fine, after all, you were a little brother of mine, so I would feel upset as well if something bad had happened to you."

His words were strange and Zhang Xiaohua could not understand them.

However, Tian Zhongxi pointed to the beddings on the empty bed and said, "Those were the bed sheets that you used, check if you have missed out anything, then follow me and I will arrange your new accommodation."

Upon hearing his words, Zhang Xiaohua became like a monkey whose tail caught fire, he immediately jumped up and said, "Brother Xi, I beg you, please do not arrange to put me in elder brother Ma's room, please, I beg you."

Chapter 106: Difference

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Difference

When Tian Zhongxi saw Zhang Xiaohua's pleading face, a smile unexpectedly appeared on his wooden face and he said, "First bring over the bed sheets, where your new accommodation is will not be up to me."

Zhang Xiaohua could not understand again and he asked, "Brother Xi, in that case, who will it be up to?"

Tian Zhongxi did not answer him and waved his hands, "Come, follow me. You'll know when you reach there."

After finishing his sentence, he pushed opened the door with the same neutral expression on his face.

Zhang Xiaohua's head was wet with perspiration as he hugged his bed sheets and followed behind Tian Zhongxi out of the room.

Tian Zhongxi turned left after he exited his room and walked in the direction of Ma Jing's room, and Zhang Xiaohua's emotions became jumpy again. When Tian Zhongxi stopped in front of Ma Jing's room, Zhang Xiaohua's heartbeat sped up even faster as he lamented in his heart, "And you still say you won't let me come here, you were just fooling around with me."

Zhang Xiaohua could not see Tian Zhongxi's face which had the slightest hint of a smile, the edges of his mouth curled up as he was enjoyed the moment and he only resumed his steps and walked onward when Zhang Xiaohua's heart felt like it was about to pop out from his eyes.

The poor Zhang Xiaohua did not realized that he was being played a fool with, he heaved a sigh of relief and thank every god he knew from the bottom of his

heart before following behind. Tian Zhongxi continued to walk until he reached the room at the end before stopping and knocked on the door. A very familiar voice came out from the room, “Who is it? Come in.”

It was actually He Tianshu’s room.

If we were talking about the number one person Zhang Xiaohua wanted to meet in Huanxi mountain villa, then the person had to be He Tianshu. While he initially expected to meet the person after dinner again, who knew that he would have met him earlier under these circumstances?

Zhang Xiaohua hugged his bed sheets as he followed Tian Zhongxi into the room, and when he saw the face that he missed for several months, Zhang Xiaohua suddenly felt the urge to burst into tears. This urge to cry did not even appear when Zhang Xiaohua woke up from his accident and saw Zhang Xiaohu’s face.

Tian Zhongxi looked at He Tianshu and said, “Squad leader He, I have brought Zhang Xiaohua over.”

Zhang Xiaohua stood at the door alone with his left hand hugging his bed sheet and shouted, “Squad leader He.....”

Just like a child who had been bullied but did not dare to inform the adults, who swallowed his teeth into his stomach, a pleading expression appeared in Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes as though the other party was able to stand up for him.

He Tianshu looked at this stupid “disciple” whom he taught personally, and recalled his incomplete fist stances that were full of mistakes, and imagined him alone under the moonlight practicing his fist stances over and again, and thought of the courage that enabled him to stand up against a martial art expert to save his elder brother, exchanging his right hand for the life of his elder brother.

Even though He Tianshu was not there to personally witness the event, he could imagine the determined expression in Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes and the little fist that extended into a punch, and the feet in the position of a horse stance which he taught the latter personally.

However, He Tianshu did not spare a second glance at Zhang Xiaohua, he

retracted his gaze and smiled towards Tian Zhongxi while saying, "Alright, thanks for your trouble, leave him to me."

Tian Zhongxi nodded his head and did not stop to chat idly, he turned around to face Zhang Xiaohua and patted the latter's shoulders while saying, "Zhang Xiaohua, you will follow squad leader He in the future, and take care of yourself."

After finishing his sentence, he walked away without waiting for a reply.

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand the current situation as he stood in his spot thinking of what he should do next.

Fortunately, at that moment, He Tianshu walked forward and said in a warm tone, "Zhang Xiaohua, how are your injuries?"

Zhang Xiaohua recovered his senses then and smiled back, "Squad leader He, it is not a big deal. I can already do some light activities now."

Following which, Zhang Xiaohua apologized, "Squad leader, I am sorry."

He Tianshu was surprised, he asked, "Sorry? Why?"

Zhang Xiaohua felt strange and he said, "I have lost your face when I got injured from the match. You can scold or punish me, but please don't throw me away."

He Tianshu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he asked, "Who told you this?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Isn't that written in the books? Or is it not true?"

He Tianshu was surprised and inquired again, "I thought you can't read? Did you hear it from someone?"

Zhang Xiaohua turned his small head up and said proudly, "Squad leader He, I can already read and even write now. I read all these from the books."

He Tianshu grew even more surprised, he said, "You already know how to read with just a few months of study? Not bad, not bad at all."

When Zhang Xiaohua heard the other party's praise, his face turned red and said humbly, "It is nothing much, I only studied the children's elementary material "Words explanation" and read some other compulsory books that they

use.”

“What? The elementary “Words explanation”?” He Tianshu’s head was full of perspiration, “You said that you finished studying “Words explanation”?”

Upon hearing the other party’s response, Zhang Xiaohua felt apologetic and said, “Squad leader He, I was wrong again. I should not have shown off like this, I know that it is an elementary material for children to study, I won’t say it again.”

He Tianshu fell onto the ground with a “Dang”, followed by a flipping the carp motion as he stood back up in front of Zhang Xiaohua. Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes were full of stars and he thought secretly, “Idol-ah, idol. Such a suave movement, I wonder when I can learn it.”

The poor He Tianshu slapped his forehead and thought, “ ‘Words explanation’, children’s elementary studying material? Am I going insane?”

He Tianshu asked, “Where is the book? Let me see it.”

Zhang Xiaohua then remembered something and he said urgently, “Oh, I left it in Ma Jing’s room. I will get it right now.”

After finishing his sentence, he turned his tail and ran away.

He Tianshu immediately called out, “It is okay, Zhang Xiaohua, we’ll see about that in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua obediently stopped in his tracks. He Tianshu said, “No matter where you heard that from, or if you read it yourself, you don’t have to treat it for real. Firstly, you are not my disciple, I am only teaching you fist martial arts that are widespread across Jianghu and are not unique to my school. You have not entered our school so I naturally cannot chase you away. Secondly, you have done well this time, and even if I were your master, I would not blame you for your actions.”

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed and he said, “Really? Squad leader He, you also thought that I did well? However, I could not even take a palm from my opponent and still lost in the end.”

He Tianshu patted Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders and said, “Fool, you have only learned some fist martial arts for a few days, and how long has he been learning

for? What fist martial art did you learn, and what inner energy cultivation method did he learn? Even though the purple sand palm is not some high grade inner energy cultivation method, it is more than enough to deal with someone like you. It is just like an adult fighting with a new-born infant, you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Oh right, let me see your injury.” He Tianshu lifted Zhang Xiaohua’s arm and said, “Put the bed sheets on the chair.”

Zhang Xiaohua followed his instructions and placed the bed sheets on the chair beside him, and the obediently let He Tianshu inspect him. Zhang Xiaohua’s right hand still had its bandage on, and He Tianshu did not unwrap them and only felt over the bandage carefully and after he was done, Zhang Xiaohua with his uncertain face, happily said, “Squad leader He, I am recovering quite well tight. The physician in the escort station had said that I cannot practice fist martial arts for the time being and have to wait a few days later. Sigh, I really can’t wait anymore, how I wish I can do the horse stance now.”

He Tianshu looked at Zhang Xiaohua’s excited expression and he broke his solemn silence. He smiled and said, “Alright, let’s wait for a few days and I will check your injuries, then we can all practice fist martial arts together.”

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed and said, “Really, squad leader He, you are willing to teach me fist martial arts again? Aren’t you afraid that I will forget?”

Upon hearing his words, He Tianshu immediately collected himself and said regretfully, “About this... this..., I will let little second Nie teach you first, and after you have learnt enough, I will take over again.”

Zhang Xiaohua was elated and he said, “Then I will definitely learn properly like my second brother and clinch victory in my next match so that squad leader He’s face won’t be thrown again.”

He Tianshu forced a smile and said, “Alright, I believe you can do it.”

Following which, He Tianshu said, “However, before you practice any fist martial art, I will have to arrange an accommodation for you.”

“Oh, didn’t brother Xi say...” when Zhang Xiaohua spoke up to here, he suddenly froze and said in disbelief, “Squad leader He, could the person brother

Xi said will arrange me future accommodations be you?”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “Didn’t Tian Zhongxi said that he will entrust you to me? Did you not hear it clearly? Or are you so foolish that you still cannot understand?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “I am muddleheaded about these kind of things sometimes, of course I understand that you will be responsible for my arrangement. However, I still find it hard to believe, I am only an insignificant servant in the villa and you are appointed from Piaomiao sect to look after the herbs, we are poles apart from each other so how can I be under your responsibility? That is the part I do not understand.”

He Tianshu smiled as he scolded, “How do you know that you are only a servant in the villa? Your status is not just a servant of Huanxi villa, but a representative of Lotus escort as well, so you are not the same as the other azure robed little hats. Watching you mingle with them every day without any awareness of being part of the escort station, think about it. If you were just a servant, why would the villa master instruct me to teach you fist martial arts?”

Only then did Zhang Xiaohua understand the situation, he said, “Oh, I understand now. No wonder the waist token I got when I went out was different from elder brother Ma and the rest, so this was the reason.”

“Mm, it’s like this.” He Tianshu nodded his head and said, “When you first came here, you were indeed arranged to substitute Liu Er’s jobs. However, don’t you think that it is a waste of your thousand jin strength? The villa master will not waste human talent to let you do such ordinary jobs, you were only supposed to familiarize yourself with the environment here through that job. Unfortunately, plans cannot adjust fast enough to reality, and you met with an accident. I even thought that I will not get to see you anymore, but third master Qu from the escort station spoke up on your behalf and the villa master relented, thus she assigned you to our team, do you understand now?”

Zhang Xiaohua was all smiles as he said, “I understand, squad leader He, I will have to listen to your instructions in the future. Oh right, I have not met elder sister villa master, she is a really kind person, I must thank her sometime in the future.”

He Tianshu smiled as he stroked Zhang Xiaohua's head, "That's right, you should indeed thank the villa master, she has treated you very well."

"Alright, follow me. I will arrange your accommodation first since I still have to eat my lunch." After finishing his sentence, He Tianshu picked up the bed sheets from the chair and just as he was about to step out, Zhang Xiaohua quickly used his left hand to snatch the bed sheet and said, "Squad leader He, I can't let you carry it for me."

He Tianshu did not agree, he smiled and said, "Your hands are quite inconvenient, I will help you carry them for now, it is only two steps to the next rooms anyway."

Listening to He Tianshu's logic, Zhang Xiaohua also agreed and did not insist anymore.

He Tianshu carried the bed sheets and brought Zhang Xiaohua out of the room, turned right to the fifth room and pushed the door to enter. There was no one in the room but it was spick and span, and the layout of the interior was the same as Zhang Xiaohua's previous room. He Tianshu threw the bed sheet into one of the beds and said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Zhang Xiaohua, from today on, this room will belong to you. You do not have to work for now, just nurse your injuries and if you are feeling bored, you can follow little second Nie to the herb fields to look around."

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the empty room and he asked in puzzlement, "Squad leader He, there is no other people in this room but me?"

He Tianshu smiled and said, "That's right, our living accommodations are not the same as Tian Zhongxi and the rest, all of us have our own rooms each, little second Nie and the rest are the same. Unless you still want to live with them? However, even if you are willing, they may not be as well. You should just live comfortably and alone."

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and said, "It's nothing much, living alone is just living alone. However, I have not lived in a single room by myself since young, so I may take some time getting used to this."

He Tianshu said, "Mm, just take your time. If there is any matter, or if you need anything, just look for me. You can ask me anything you don't understand, or

look for little second Nie and the rest. If you become more familiar with them, then there may be a likelihood that you will get bullied, haha.”

He Tianshu then slapped his stomach and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, it is already past noon, aren’t you hungry? I am already famished; shall we go have our lunch?”

Zhang Xiaohua said happily, “Alright, I have not eaten the dishes in the mountain villa for so long so I’ve missed them. Squad leader He, let’s go together.”

After finishing his sentence, they walked one ahead of the other to the canteen.

Upon entering the canteen, everyone was close to finish their lunches. He Tianshu’s entry did not attract anyone’s attention, but Zhang Xiaohua who was walking behind did.

Those azure robed little hats people who already finished their lunches stayed behind as though they were waiting for something.

When Zhang Xiaohua entered the hall, he walked naturally towards the two tables occupied by the azure robed little hats. However, he noticed that the tables were full without any empty seat, and he felt embarrassed as though it was his first day again, were the people playing another joke on him? Zhang Xiaohua’s previous seat was originally Liu Er’s and now that the latter was back, he naturally reclaimed his seat again. The other people who had finished did not get up, so where could Zhang Xiaohua sit?

It seemed to be the reason why those azure robed little hat men did not get up after finishing their lunch.

Unfortunately for them, Zhang Xiaohua was not affected by their snide gaze as he walked towards He Tianshu’s table and sat down without hesitation. Everyone was surprised, who did not know that the Piaomiao disciples all looked down on them, and now that one of the new servants had sat in their midst, won’t he be kicked out ruthlessly?

Everyone was looking with anticipation for Zhang Xiaohua to be “levelled into sand”, so they waited, and waited, and waited longer for the show.

While the few dozens of men fixed their eyes on the other table, the little second Nie from Piaomiao sect lifted up his hand, and the azure robed little hats counted in their hearts, “One, two, three, boom.....” Just as they were expecting an altercation, little second Nie did not slap Zhang Xiaohua across the room as they had anticipated, but his hand landed softly on Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders as he smiled towards the boy and said, “Brother, you have finally returned, are your injuries better? Come eat the chicken drumstick, I heard that it is nourishing.”

It was followed by the “Ding, dang, boom, crash” of the azure robed men with little hats; those who had glasses dropped their glasses, those who did not dropped their eyeballs, they were a complete mess and some even fell off their chairs.

When everyone was seated back onto their own seats and had rearranged their expressions again, they stood up lifelessly as though a lively show was just cancelled abruptly and walked out of the canteen. Some even looked up at the blinding bright sun and asked, “It is strange, did the sun rise from the west today?”

The azure robed men with little hats then turned their salty gaze onto Zhang Xiaohua as though they were looking at a traitor who almost took their lives, and stared vehemently at him before shuffling their feet and leaving. Some almost spat on the floor, but they did not because they were afraid of being found out by the duty aunty who would dock their pay. That would not be worth it at all.

Zhang Xiaohua was blissfully unaware of the thoughts of the azure robed men with little hats, he was fully focused on the delicacies in front of him. Even though the meal that the azure robed men with little hats was delicious to Zhang Xiaohua in the past, his taste buds had become more and more picky after being fed by Yu Deyi’s specially prepared meals, and thus Zhang Xiaohua was no longer as ignorant as he was before to actually think that the food He Tianshu and the rest ate was small in portion and not filling. Sigh, as the saying goes, food can never be too good, and ignorance is bliss.

Chapter 107: Question

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Question

The people around all left by the time Zhang Xiaohua finished his first lunch since he arrived back Huanxi mountain villa.

Zhang Xiaohua was already late when he came in with He Tianshu, and when he saw the other party finished his lunch hurriedly, Zhang Xiaohua also wanted to get up. However, He Tianshu stopped the boy and told him to take his time to eat; he said that there was no work allocated to Zhang Xiaohua in the afternoon, and thus, the latter sat back down and took his time to try this and that dish until he was fully satisfied. Zhang Xiaohua then left the canteen after that.

The ray of the afternoon sun was naturally warm and comforting, Zhang Xiaohua took a leisurely walk back to his room with his belly full and satisfied. His steps were extra-light that day, it was not often that he got to eat such a good lunch so he was more than happy to extend this feeling of happiness.

Unfortunately, the relaxed atmosphere was broken by a female voice which called out, "Zhang Xiaohua? Have you finished your meal?"

Zhang Xiaohua turned his head, and he saw Qiu Tong at a small courtyard from afar calling to him.

Zhang Xiaohua happily ran over while calling out, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, why are you here?"

Qiu Tong smiled as she said, "The villa master is not feeling well today so I was going to the canteen to see what good food you have there that I can bring back to her."

Zhang Xiaohua asked in concern, "What is wrong with elder sister villa

master?”

Qiu Tong's expression turned bitter as she said, "You shouldn't ask these questions since you are not privy to the villa matters."

"Oh," Zhang Xiaohua compliantly changed the topic and said, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, I just came back to the mountain villa in the morning, Ma Jing and Liu Er came to the escort station to pick me up."

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "I know, I was the one who instructed them to do so. I have been busy during this period of time, and Tian Zhongxi coincidentally said that he had sent some people to go Pingyang city to purchase some stuff so I entrusted them to bring you back."

Zhang Xiaohua said gratefully to Qiu Tong, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, many thanks. You treat me really well like my elder sister Liu Qing."

"Liu Qing?" Qiu Tong was surprised, "Who is that?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled widely and said, "Elder sister Liu Qing is my sister-in-law now, I would call her elder sister before she married my eldest brother."

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "Xiaohua, everyone, not just me, likes you because we know that you are an obedient boy who can take hardships."

Zhang Xiaohua hopped like a sparrow and said, "That's right, elder sister villa master as well, when will I get the opportunity to thank her?"

Qiu Tong said, "Mm, there will be a chance in the future, you just need to keep it in your heart for now."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, "I understand, elder sister Qiu Tong."

Qiu Tong asked again, "Are your injuries better now?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Yes, the physician said I cannot carry heavy things, but there should be no problem with other tasks."

Qiu Tong nodded her head and said, "I believe you already know that you have been assigned to squad leader He this time, and he will arrange your accommodation and jobs later on."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, "That's right, brother Xi took me to squad leader He's side when I came back, and squad leader He arranged my accommodation immediately after that. I just finished my lunch with them and am preparing to go back."

Qiu Tong said, "That's good, your injuries are not fully recovered so do not do anything too strenuous during this period. First follow squad leader He to familiarize yourself, his problem over there is not that easy to solve and I doubt you can be of much help either."

Zhang Xiaohua asked, "What problem is it? Is it very important?"

Qiu Tong said, "You will find out when you go over. Sigh, this is also a cause of the villa master's bad mood. If you are able to solve the problem, you will be doing a large service to the villa master and it will be better than thanking her personally. Ah, look at what I am thinking, Xiaohua, you don't have to ponder for real, elder sister is just rambling by herself. There was a persistent problem that the experts could not solve so what can a child like you do? Alright, elder sister is busy with her job so she won't talk to you anymore, you should take good care of your body and don't fall sick again, or that will be adding more weight under the snow."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Okay, elder sister Qiu Tong, I will be careful. I will go on now."

After finishing his sentence, the two waved to each other and went on their own way.

While he was walking back, Zhang Xiaohua thought, "What problem has squad leader He and the villa master faced that has caused the villa master to lose her appetite? However, since they are helpless, then I am less likely to be of any help. I should go over to look at the situation first before thinking of anything else."

Not long after, Zhang Xiaohua returned to his own little room, his knapsack was still in Ma Jing's room. The other party should be working in the fields at this time so it was not appropriate to go over to take his belongings, it would be better to wait till they returned in the evening. Even though squad leader He has assigned him to rest, how could he simply do so? A preteen child would naturally be restless at that age, not to mention that he had been confined to a bed

during the past several months, why would he stay in his room when he had the chance to go out and about now?

He pushed open the door and followed the small familiar road to go to where He Tianshu and the rest most likely were at.

As for exactly where He Tianshu would work, Zhang Xiaohua was not very clear but he has often heard Ma Jing's incessant complaints, so the general location was still within his knowledge and it was not far from the place where the azure robed little hats worked at.

During his journey, he saw many of the azure robed little hats busy watering the plants, weeding the ground and they also noticed him and whispered among themselves. Zhang Xiaohua thought back to Ma Jing, and naturally guessed that they were envious so he ignored them and lowered his head while continuing his journey.

He Tianshu's herb field was separated from Tian Zhongxi's ones, there were some simple barriers erected in between to prevent the azure robed little hats from going over. It could be seen from afar, and the previous Zhang Xiaohua would not have dared to go over as well.

On that particular day, his steps were slow and leisurely without any hint of anxiety as he walked passed the barricade.

After crossing the barrier, he studied his surroundings and noticed that there were not many differences on the other side, it was only a few herb fields put together. However, the herbs fields were not completely the same, there were herbs where some were already sprouting from, and others where it was completely bare as though the land was just reclaimed.

He Tianshu and the other three men were also busy and they only noticed Zhang Xiaohua when the latter got closer.

He Tianshu smiled and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, why are you not resting in the room and over here instead?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Squad leader He, I am too free so I came over to watch and learn so that I can be of more help in the future."

He Tianshu said, "There is not much difference in the work here and at the

herb fields on the other side, it is only because the herbs are more important and some herbs require more attention. I have heard from Tian Zhongxi that you are quite good at your job having worked on the fields since young, so there should be no problem for you to adapt to the work here as well. Just watch little second Nie and listen to the important details that he will share with you. However.....”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he asked, “However what?”

He Tianshu said, “However, I hope that you do not forget everything like how you would during your martial arts practice and cause little second Nie to repeat what he said hundred over times.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned red and said, “That won’t happen, squad leader He. My memory is pretty good, even gentleman Li praised me. However, I am just bad at fist martial arts, haha.’

He Tianshu asked, “Which gentleman Li”

Zhang Xiaohua explained, “Gentleman Li is gentleman Li, he is my teacher who studies in a school and had taught me to read.”

He Tianshu’s eyes brightened and he said, “He is the teacher who gave you “Words explanation” as a text to study? Haha, he is quite interesting, I would like to meet him if given the chance.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Squad leader He also knows that he is interesting, when I see him the next time, I will let he know that you want to see him so he will come over to visit.”

He Tianshu waved his hands and said, “Don’t tell him to come especially to see me, we can just meet each other when the opportunity arises.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “Okay, gentleman Li is also quite cool about things, so he won’t have any opinions about it.”

After that, little second Nie brought Zhang Xiaohua over as he explained the steps while working.

The work on the field on this side was indeed more complex than the other side, every type of herb has a specific time to be watered and the amount of water had to be controlled. Furthermore, there were other many things to

consider, and the details were all important enough to be memorized. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua's usual memory was much better than his memory for martial arts or He Tianshu would be plagued with worry for the boy.

The herbs taken care of by the pharmacy hall were few, there were only a few fields or four people would not be enough to look after them. However, these fields were crowded with herbs, so no empty space was being wasted; when Zhang Xiaohua was learning from little second Nie, he saw He Tianshu brought a person to water the bare soil while stepping around carefully, they would occasionally pick up some soil and frown.

Zhang Xiaohua felt strange and he asked little second Nie, "Elder brother little second, what do you think squad leader He is doing? Why is he watering the bare soil and looking dazedly?"

Little second Nie gave Zhang Xiaohua a warning stare and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, I am warning you not to call me elder brother little second, why does it feel like I am a servant? Your elder brother Nie is still a Piaomiao disciple with a position in Jianghu, how could my status be lowered so much through your words? This better be the last time, call me elder brother Nie in the future!"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, "I understand, so quickly tell me what is going on elder brother little second."

Little second Nie's nose flared and snorted as he ignored the boy. Zhang Xiaohua urgently said, "Alright, alright, elder brother Nie, I was wrong okay? A great person like you must be so magnanimous, please don't be angry alright?"

Seeing that little second Nie still remained silent, Zhang Xiaohua rolled his eyes and said, "If you still want to remain angry, then when my injuries have healed, I will ask squad leader He to appoint you to teach me martial arts!"

Upon hearing his threat, little second Nie immediately gave up and smiled, "Little bother Xiaohua, you shouldn't be like this. If you want to learn martial arts, you can just ask me directly and not go to squad leader He. Look at how frustrated he is now, let him concentrate on straightening his problem first. Actually, about this matter, it all began when we first started to grow the herbs, I believe that you have heard about us opening the fields from Ma Jing and the rest. These herbs are for the exclusive use of the pharmacy hall and they are not

like ordinary herbs but long lost herbs in the Jianghu that our Piaomiao sect managed to recover. If not, why would they call us to grow these instead of letting Ma Jing and the rest do it?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and said, “I know a little about this, but why does that have to do with the bare soil?”

Little second Nie smiled mysteriously and said, “Little brother Xiaohua, open your intelligent eyes to see, or use that sharp mind to think, if that is bare soil, why would squad leader He be watering it?”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, “So it is not bare soil?”

Little second Nie said in a tone as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, “Of course, there are seeds planted there.”

Zhang Xiaohua was even more confused, he asked, “Then why won’t they sprout? All the other herbs have sprouted and some even grew quite tall.”

Little second Nie dusted his hands and said, “Yes, why won’t it sprout? This is the reason for squad leader’s frustration. If I had known the answer, I could take his place, or at least not let squad leader He be so frustrated anymore.”

Zhang Xiaohua finally understood the situation, and he realized what Qiu Tong’s words meant when he met her earlier in the day. Even though these seeds had been sowed about half a year ago, they had not sprouted for some reason. Since everyone was stumped on the reason, they were unable to cultivate the herb which was lost long ago in Jianghu, no wonder He Tianshu was so frustrated and elder sister villa master had no appetite.

Unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua was only an ordinary child who knew how to farm, and he now knew how to grow common herbs, and he did not think that he could solve the problem.

Seeing the pitiful He Tianshu, Zhang Xiaohua thought it was better if he placed his heart into learning from little second Nie so he could transit into his new role earlier.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua poured all his heart into learning about the new herbs. In the evening, Zhang Xiaohua took his knapsack from Ma Jing’s room, he ignored the latter who tried to grab onto his hand and the fierce expression on

his face and vanished into a puff of smoke as he ran back into his room. After finally escaping from Ma Jing's "demon feet", why would he want to stay there longer?

When he thought of Liu Er who stayed there while adapting so well, Zhang Xiaohua's respect and admiration towards the latter immediately rose to a higher level.

Night-time was He Tianshu and the rest's time to practice their martial arts, and Zhang Xiaohua went to the empty space as he usually did before. Not long later, He Tianshu and the rest arrived, He Tianshu said, "Zhang Xiaohua, you cannot practice fist martial arts for now, try doing a horse stance and see if your right hand can take the stress."

Zhang Xiaohua did so and said, "Squad leader He, there is no problem with my right hand. However, it is still wrapped with bandages so I cannot clench my fist."

He Tianshu said, "Then do not clench your fist and stay in that horse stance position, I believe you have not done the horse stance for the past few months."

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned red and he said, "Yes, I stayed in bed the whole time in the beginning but when I got better later and could walk around, I completely forgot about practicing the horse stance."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "That is because you never really trained much in the horse stance so how could you remember it? Things that come easily are seldom treasured, so it is not really your fault. I believe those stances you learnt have all been returned to me."

Zhang Xiaohua protested, "I did not, squad leader He, I still remember all those stances, I can show them to you if you don't believe me."

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohua began to adopt the opening stance but He Tianshu quickly stopped him and said, "Don't train blindly, you can't even clench your fist so how can you practice your martial arts? Wait for a few days, anyway it is fine even if you forgot those martial arts, perhaps learning from the beginning will be better."

After saying that, he laughed heartily and went back to his training.

Zhang Xiaohua had nothing to say as well so he stood in the horse stance and watched as the rest trained.

While watching little second Nie and the rest practiced fist martial arts, palm martial arts and even sword martial arts one after another, Zhang Xiaohua felt an indescribable sense of jealousy as he wondered when he would be able to do so as well.

He Tianshu was practicing under a tree and his movements were very slow. However, Zhang Xiaohua could feel the power within each motion, and each stance also carried some sort of energy which was unlike the martial arts he trained in that only had form but no depth. He could not help but feel something in his heart, was this the so called inner energy that Zhang Xiaohua was referring to?

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua directed all his attention into He Tianshu's practice in hoping to discover something new. Unfortunately, he only felt the other party's intense aura after He Tianshu finished his training, and did not catch anything else, even the stances seemed to be blurred to him.

Could the Zhang Xiaohua who frequently forgets his martial art returned?

Or was the environment in Huanxi mountain villa somehow not as good as Lotus escort?

He Tianshu walked to Zhang Xiaohua's front after he finished his practice, and upon looking at the latter's still figure, he said in a satisfied tone, "Zhang Xiaohua, your horse stance is still really good. Apart from your right hand, everything else is in the place where I have taught, your standard in horse stance is truly not ordinary. If our Piaomiao sect has a horse stance competition, I will definitely recommend you to take part, and you can definitely become the champion."

Zhang Xiaohua was elated and he said, "Really, squad leader He, you must call me if there is such a chance, roughly when will it be?"

He Tianshu smiled and said, "Fine, no problem. When it is monkey year and horse month again, I will definitely remember to call you. Alright, pack up and go back early to rest more tonight. You can follow little second Nie tomorrow, I guess you will be too bored to stay in the room again."

Zhang Xiaohua jumped in happiness and said, “Yay, I understand.”

However, his heart was still thinking when was monkey year and horse month?

As he followed behind He Tianshu, Zhang Xiaohua could not contain his curiosity anymore and asked, “Squad leader He, when you were practicing martial arts just now, were you using inner energy?”

He Tianshu stopped in his tracks, turned back and asked, “How did you know?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “I saw that you were practicing in a different way from me, and your stance seemed to contain some hidden power. My own stances are just the motions only.”

He Tianshu pondered and said, “Your eyesight is pretty good, it was like you said indeed.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Squad leader He, this inner energy cultivation method, can... can you teach me?”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “Inner energy cultivation method? You also learnt this from the escort station?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Yes, I heard my second brother said so. He is a delivery hand in the escort station, and is currently learning inner energy cultivation in the martial arts school.”

He Tianshu was surprised, he asked, “You second brother is a delivery hand but he is learning how to cultivate inner energy in the martial arts school?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “Yes, it is like that.”

He Tianshu said, “It seems your second brother is unlike you, he should be pretty good at martial arts. The escort station would usually pick the more talented people to undergo inner energy cultivation training.”

Zhang Xiaohua said proudly, “Yes, my second brother is a genius which is why he could learn to cultivate inner energy in the martial arts school.”

He then asked in anticipation, “Do you think I can learn it as well?”

Chapter 108: Joy and relief

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Joy and relief

He Tianshu sighed and said, "Xiaohua, it is not that I do not want to, but the inner energy cultivation method that I learnt is exclusively for Piaomiao disciples, anyone who is not a member of our sect cannot learn it. If we were found to have contravened the rule, not only will I be punished, you will also be crippled of your martial arts. Secondly, the requirements of learning inner energy cultivation methods are much higher than fist martial arts, it requires aptitude. If your aptitude is poor, you will not be able to achieve much no matter how hard you train and you might even be led astray and lose your life. Hasn't your second brother told you all these? He can't possibly teach you martial arts as well."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head in disappointment, "He did say so."

He Tianshu stroke Zhang Xiaohua's head and said, "Let's return, everyone has their own destiny that the heavens have arranged for them. If you are destined to, then your wishes will be granted perhaps not long after, if not, all your efforts will be fruitless no matter how hard you work."

Zhang Xiaohua bent his head in disappointment as he followed He Tianshu back.

Under the oil lamp light, Zhang Xiaohua was examining a book; the book was not some kind of martial art manual but rather part of a literary collection that Li Jinfeng had passed to him. During the period when he was nursing his injuries, it had become a habit for him to read some books in the night no matter if they were literature or fist martial art manuals.

Since all the fist martial art manuals that he could read have been read, he could only turn to literature which was vast enough for him to read a lifetime.

Suddenly, Zhang Xiaohua's heart moved involuntarily when he read the words "learning new things during revision", "revising continuously after learning" on the book. He carefully put the book down and ran over his memories of those fist martial art manuals; there was no particular reason why he did not tell He Tianshu about them, just like how a child would not tell any adult immediately when he got a toy that he liked, and he will take it out when it was not expected to have a good laugh upon seeing the dumbstruck faces of the adults.

Zhang Xiaohua had these types of intentions, but most importantly, he still lacked confidence to be able to perform these martial arts. Rather than to tell anybody now, it would not be too late to let the others know when his body has recovered so he can try them out physically.

Fortunately, those martial art stances flow as smoothly as a river in Zhang Xiaohua's head as clear as he first remembered them. However, Zhang Xiaohua's expression did not change, he lifted up his right hand and looked at the bandages on it, then used his left hand to stroke it.

The night grew deeper so Zhang Xiaohua blew out the oil lamp and went back to sleep.

For the next few days, Zhang Xiaohua would repeat the habit of following little second Nie as the latter work to familiarize himself with the various herbs, then practice the horse stance in the night, which was overall quite boring for him.

On that particular night, when Zhang Xiaohua was reading a book under the oil lamp, he heard a knock on his door.

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, it was his first time having a visitor in the night, so he put down his book and opened the door. From the light of the oil lamp, he could make out the single armed elder Yu's face.

Zhang Xiaohua was astonished and he said, "Elder Yu, hello, quickly come inside."

After Zhang Xiaohua led elder Yu into the room and invited him to sit on a chair before asking the latter, "Elder Yu, I have not seen you around even though I came back for several days ago, are you very busy recently?"

Elder Yu smiled and said, "Don't mention about being back for several days,

have you even seen me around when you were staying in the mountain villa during your first month?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “I am surprised precisely because I have not seen you for several months, why have you come to visit me today?”

Elder Yu replied, “It’s nothing much, I just came over to ask on your injuries because I knew you came back.”

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned to the spot as he said, “Thanks elder Yu for your concern, my injuries have more or less healed and this bandage should be removed tomorrow after I show it to squad leader He.”

Elder Yu waved his hands and said, “Let’s not wait until tomorrow, I will help you remove the bandages now. Your injuries have probably recovered enough in these few days.”

Zhang Xiaohua was feeling strange rather than gratitude towards elder Yu, he recalled their first encounter which gave him a cold impression of the elder, so his concern was completely unexpected.

However, elder Yu was an elderly man and Zhang Xiaohua has been ingrained since young to respect the elderly so he stood there motionlessly as the former helped to remove the bandages on his hand.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua’s hand had already recovered and the medicine applied in the bandage was more for precautionary and psychological reasons. As elder Yu had said, there was no difference between unwrapping it that night and the next day, so even though elder Yu only had one arm, the bandages were removed easily with Zhang Xiaohua’s help.

There was not much difference in Zhang Xiaohua’s hand then and from before except that it was paler presumably due to the lack of sun.

Elder Yu did not immediately examine Zhang Xiaohua’s fingers, he said, “Try to clench your fist.”

Zhang Xiaohua did as he was instructed, and this simple motion felt unnatural and dumb, his fingers did not seem to be following his will. Furthermore, when Zhang Xiaohua’s fingers were contracted up to a certain point, it no longer went any further no matter how hard he tried, which meant that Zhang Xiaohua could

no longer clench his right fist.

Zhang Xiaohua felt anxiety rising in his heart, he asked, “Elder Yu, what is going on? My hand... why are my hands like this?”

Elder Yu’s expression did not change as he said, “Do not be anxious too soon, injuries are all like this when they first recovered. You will need to practice straightening and curling your fingers during this period for it to regain its function. I will now help you inspect the condition of your bones.”

Elder Yu used his thumb and index finger to pinch Zhang Xiaohua’s finger cun by cun, and after much effort, he finished his examination and raised his head. Zhang Xiaohua could not see the expression on the other party’s face under the light of the oil lamp.

Zhang Xiaohua wanted to ask the other party for his opinion but there did not seem to be any obvious abnormalities with his fingers so he did not open his mouth.

Elder Yu did not explain to Zhang Xiaohua the progress of his recovery. Instead, he asked, “Why do you want to practice martial arts?”

Zhang Xiaohua felt that the answer was obvious, he immediately replied, “Of course it is to protect my family.”

“Apart from protecting your family, what else will you do after you learn martial arts?” Elder Yu continued to press the boy.

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows and answered honestly, “I don’t know, I never thought that far ahead, I am only thinking of how to learn martial arts for now.”

It became elder Yu’s turn to frown, he asked, “If you had learnt martial arts, would you protect the weak and help them when you come across any bullying cases?”

Upon hearing his words, the images of his father and elder brothers being bullied in Lu town as well as his eldest brother and him being trampled upon by the Xicui mountain bandits flashed across his mind, Zhang Xiaohua’s blood immediately boiled and he said, “Of course, if I knew martial arts and could help other people, I would definitely do it.”

Elder Yu asked again, “Can you be certain that the weaker party is innocent and deserves your help?”

Zhang Xiaohua was confused and he asked, “Elder Yu, I do not really understand what you said. If you are weak, why would you step on the shoes of other people without any reason?”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Perhaps this question is too difficult, you are still young and do not understand how the human heart works. Perhaps you will understand once you grow up.”

He then asked again, “If you want to defend the weak against the strong, but the other party is stronger than you, will you still lend a hand?”

This question led Zhang Xiaohua into a loss. During the events in Lu town, Zhang Xiaolong would definitely intervene no matter how powerful the other party was, but even Zhang Xiaohua experienced the tragic end results first hand. Coupled with teacher Liu and Liu Kai’s constant reminders to think of one’s ability before helping, this question was really hard for Zhang Xiaohua to answer.

However, a moment later, Zhang Xiaohua thought of an idea and he smiled, “Isn’t that the reason why I am continuously pursuing martial arts and even inner energy cultivation?”

Elder Yu’s brows wrinkled and smoothened and he no longer asked Zhang Xiaohua any more questions. Instead, he moved his attention to Zhang Xiaohua’s hand and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, although your right hand has healed, it has suffered under an inner energy attack so there will be differences compared to the past just like a vase that has broken but is glued back together. Even though the vase can be used, the cracks are still there and if one is careless, it may shatter again. Thus, there will be obstacles to your martial arts training and you must be mentally prepared for them.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand the severity of the situation, he smiled and said, “The physician has already told me so, it will slowly recover again. Bones can grow but vases cannot. I will be contented enough as long as I can train in martial arts and cultivate in inner energy.”

Elder Yu sighed but he did not say anything further. He nodded his head and turned around to let Zhang Xiaohua rest early.

Zhang Xiaohua sent off the man up till his doorsteps, and as he looked at the back of elder Yu, he felt puzzled. The elder had stayed in his room for so long and asked so many questions, what could be the other party's motive? Zhang Xiaohua did not think it was as simple as to unwrap his bandages and check on his recovery.

However, Zhang Xiaohua was unable to figure out the reason despite thinking for long, and since time will tell anyway, he would naturally find out when the time was ripe. Zhang Xiaohua kept on pondering until he fell asleep without extinguishing the oil lamp.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua walked over to He Tianshu and the rest's practice area as usual while practicing to clench his fist on the way.

Zhang Xiaohua was the first to arrive as usual, he did not enter the horse stance immediately but tried to clench his fist and try out some fist martial art stances. He realized that without fully clenching his fist, he was still able to perform the complete action without needing any other adjustments, except for certain stances where the right hand had to change its form. Only then would his fingers feel inflexible and his palms numb, but he believed that with consistent training, all these will eventually go away.

Thinking back to the earlier period when he would not practice fist martial arts in fear of letting his fingers grow twisted, Zhang Xiaohua felt that he was quite foolish and now that he knew that he had to familiarize his hand again, he thought that it would have been better if he had practiced fist martial arts earlier. There was no need for him to only practice horse stance while watching He Tianshu and the rest practice martial arts every day.

However, Zhang Xiaohua forgot that he could not clench his fist while the bandage was still wrapped.

While Zhang Xiaohua was fooling around while doing some fanciful moves, He Tianshu and the rest came over. He Tianshu smiled as he greeted Zhang Xiaohua, "Zhang Xiaohua, why have you woken up so early? Are you too impatient to remove your bandages?"

Zhang Xiaohua giggled as he extended his right hand and clenched his fist halfway, he said proudly, "Squad leader He, you see, my bandages are already

unwrapped, and only my fist cannot clench itself all the way so I will still need to practice it more.”

He Tianshu mock -scolded, “You little rascal, why are you so impatient? Haven’t I said that I will help to remove them today, how could you take them off by yourself?”

Zhang Xiaohua said seriously, “Squad leader He, you have maligned me. I did listen to your words and was going to let you unwrap them for me but elder Yu came over to my room last night and did it for me instead.”

He Tianshu felt strange and he asked, “What is this matter about?”

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua recounted the events of the previous night to He Tianshu, and the latter had a forehead full of perspiration while he listened. However, when he heard the questions elder Yu asked Zhang Xiaohua, he frowned slightly, it was obvious that he looked favourably on the boy and was testing his personality, but could the old man be considering accepting a disciple?

However, He Tianshu was not very clear on the background of elder Yu, he only heard vaguely that the latter was a person in Jianghu. If he had eyes on Zhang Xiaohua, then it would only be the latter’s fortune, but what about the condition of Zhang Xiaohua’s hand? He Tianshu could not help but feel suspicious but he widened his heart, this was none of his business and he would not accept Zhang Xiaohua as his own disciple anyway, so why bother think so far?

He then thought back to Zhang Xiaohua’s answers, and secretly felt that Zhang Xiaohua was really an honest fellow. If the boy was slightly more quick-witted, he would have jumped the pole and say that he would not rest if there was not one day when the sky is filled with lotus. Or at least give a more honourable reason, like for valour or peace, or the happiness of the people in Jianghu. Sigh, who would have guessed that Zhang Xiaohua said that he practiced martial arts to protect his family? If he could read elder Yu’s intention, then he would have kneeled on the floor and begged with his life for the other party to accept him as a disciple.

Such a pity.

However, would he still be Zhang Xiaohua if he did that?

He Tianshu shook his head, this type of Zhang Xiaohua would be hypocritical and disliked by everyone, and the current state of Jianghu still needed men who were honest and steady like him.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at He Tianshu shook his head and wrinkled his brow, so he asked, "Squad leader He, elder Yu did it because he wanted to check my injuries for my sake so you must not be angry at him."

He Tianshu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he glared at the boy and said, "Who says that I am that petty, why would I be angry if someone else unwrapped your bandages for you?"

Zhang Xiaohua swallowed his tongue but did not dare to speak up.

He then said, "Squad leader He, since you are not angry and my bandages have been unwrapped, I want to practice my fist martial arts, can you look from aside and give me pointers?"

Upon hearing his words, He Tianshu immediately took a step back and prepared himself to activate his qinggong, he said, "In that case, you can do some exercise to warm yourself up. First revise all the past fist martial arts that you have learnt. As for any new fist martial arts, I will ask little second Nie to teach them to you later, okay?"

After finishing his sentence, He Tianshu used his qinggong and escaped without waiting for Zhang Xiaohua's reply.

Zhang Xiaohua was left alone feeling strange, he said, "Why did you run so fast, squad leader He, I did not ask you to teach me, I have already remembered many complete fist martial arts and only wanted you to look at them from a side, why have you already disappeared?"

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua went to find little second Nie and the rest but they have already disappeared?

Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of jealousy, having qinggong is really convenient.

Since there was no one around to give him pointers, Zhang Xiaohua did not bother anymore, there were many complete fist martial arts carved into his memory so he could still practice the whole fist martial art without a third party's guidance anyway.

As the thought crept into his mind, the corners of Zhang Xiaohua's mouth curled up as he secretly decided, "Wait until I finished practicing all the fist martial arts, see if I do not take a dustpan to collect all your dropped jaws."

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua took up a stance and began to practice fist martial arts for the first time since he was injured.

There were many fist martial arts in his memory, he casually picked one out, squinted his eyes into a smile and he followed the figure in his memory to perform the moves.

After practicing it over once, the result felt perfect as it was exactly the same as the little figure in his memory, Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed, was he finally not a useless trash? Was He Tianshu's instruction method wrong instead? Or could he only learn the complete fist martial arts through reading manuals and memorizing their contents?

A string of questions led Zhang Xiaohua to practice his second stance, and in the end, the results led him to feel very pleased with himself. There were no missing stances, but unfortunately, the day was getting late and there was no time to practice the third stance so Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly rushed to the canteen.

However, Zhang Xiaohua did not notice that the little figure in his memory became vaguer and no longer as clear as before.

Because Zhang Xiaohua had already gotten into his role and follow little second Nie and the rest to do some less strenuous work, he was already used to using his left hand so most of the tasks were completed easily. Zhang Xiaohua would also occasionally use his right hand when it was not too busy even though it was still not adjusted yet to practice its movements. Now that his bandages were unwrapped, he would try to use his right hand more often because he knew that with more practice, he would be able to train in fist martial arts earlier, and just thinking about it made his heart burned with greater passion.

After dinner, Zhang Xiaohua went to the martial arts practicing area. However, he did not stop at his usual place and went further to where He Tianshu and the rest would not be able to see him. Nevertheless, they could still see his oil lantern which was hung on a tree so they would not worry.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua as expected, He Tianshu could see Zhang Xiaohua's oil lantern from afar and thought that the boy was embarrassed to display his incomplete martial arts, even He Tianshu was praising the boy secretly for having such self-awareness now that his injury was recovered, unlike before when the boy would practice non-stop without any tinge of embarrassment on his face.

Zhang Xiaohua stood under the tree and repeated what he did earlier that day, he slowly performed the same fist martial art and unexpectedly it was completed without missing any single stance. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed that he could complete a whole fist martial art movement.

Just as he thought of running over to He Tianshu to share his joy, he remembered that the other party would still be engrossed in his own practice and it would not be too late to share it in the next day's morning instead. Thus, he began to practice the second fist martial art in the morning, and indeed the result was like before, Zhang Xiaohua could complete the whole series of movements.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua was excited and he practiced the two martial arts over and over again from beginning to end.

Chapter 109: Grouping

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Grouping

Unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua did not realize that with each repetition, his stances were slowly changing and becoming more different from its original form, and the little figure in his mind was turning vaguer as though he was forgetting the fist martial art the more he trained.

Zhang Xiaohua's body was feeling loose after practicing all the martial arts; he read a little on his bed under the oil lamp and soon fell asleep with a smile still stuck onto his face.

When he woke up the next morning, Zhang Xiaohua excitedly ran to the empty space. His heart was full of joy as though a bundle of treasure was waiting for him in the field just on the thought of giving He Tianshu and little second Nie a surprise.

He Tianshu and the rest saw Zhang Xiaohua waiting for them, they did not feel strange; this servant would always wake up so early, who knew where the sleep which youths need to have went? Everyone greeted him as normal and went back to their practice; only He Tianshu smiled and asked, "Zhang Xiaohua, why did you go so far last night? Were you practicing some extremely powerful martial art that we are not allowed to see? No matter what martial art it is, your body has to be fully recovered to practice in it, you must be aware of your own body's condition before doing any training. After all, the saying goes that our body is the currency in Jianghu."

After He Tianshu finished his teasing and was about to leave, Zhang Xiaohua said mysteriously, "Squad leader He, I really did practice an extremely powerful martial art yesterday, do you want to see it?"

He Tianshu stopped in his tracks, he raised his eyebrows and thought secretly, “Not bad, he would “counter-tease” me now, this boy has finally picked up something. However, if you want to compete with me, there is still a long way to go.”

Thus, he “rowed his boat where the water flowed”, folded his arms and shouted aloud, “All of you come over, Zhang Xiaohua is going to show us an extremely powerful martial art.”

When little second Nie and the rest heard their squad leader’s order, they immediately shouted back their response and activated their qinggong to head to where they were.

Everyone looked at Zhang Xiaohua with anticipation and the full intention to laugh in their eyes.

The four men were fully aware of Zhang Xiaohua’s aptitude towards martial art, who would really expect the boy to perform some truly powerful martial art to them. Just because they did not see him train last night, what kind of thing could have happened during that period of time? Hence, the reason they crowded around was to add some joy in their life as they treated Zhang Xiaohua as their own lovable younger brother.

Zhang Xiaohua saw that the four of them were not looking at him seriously, and his original confidence lowered slightly. He said, “It is actually not some extremely powerful martial art, but I have managed to perform two fist martial arts completely from head to toe last night.”

Everyone became surprised and they asked, “Really? Is that so? Then it has to be an extremely powerful martial art since our Xiaohua will not be able to remember normal ones.”

Zhang Xiaohua ignored their jokes and quietened his heart, adopted the horse stance to enter the opening stance of the fist martial art he practiced down into his bones the night before.

However, as he raised his fist, he did not know where to begin, he, actually, has forgotten, everything!

His head was completely blank, this, this, what could have happened?

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned into a shade of red, how could he have forgotten everything again? He obviously practiced very thoroughly the night before.

Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua's fist had stopped just as he begun, everyone's vision was as clear as glass as they smiled, "Hurry up, Zhang Xiaohua, we can't wait to see your performance."

Zhang Xiaohua got over his shock but his heart was deeply disappointed, he said, "Hehe, I actually forgotten this fist martial art, let me try the second one."

He thought secretly to himself, "Sigh, since it is not my first time being teased by you all, just tease me all you want, I am already used to it. However, I have to regain my composure, the other fist martial art must not let me down. I will be satisfied enough if I could remember one of the two."

Indeed, perhaps the heavens had heard to Zhang Xiaohua's prayers, or an immortal just happened to fly past Zhang Xiaohua's head, Zhang Xiaohua managed to display two stances of the second fist martial art which he practiced. The only problem was that his performance was not accurate.

He Tianshu pondered for a long time after watching before asking, "Zhang Xiaohua, these two stances seem to belong to the south branch fist, but the two stances you displayed are not the same as the ones I know."

Zhang Xiaohua was helplessly standing in the same spot at a loss of what to say or do. He desperately wanted to prove that he was not some useless trash and thought that with the little figure in his head, he would be able to perform a complete martial art sequence in front of He Tianshu. However, his fear of forgetting his martial art the next day had "come to say hi" again, so it was as good as not being able to demonstrate the many fist martial arts he had memorized over the past several months.

He Tianshu was slightly heartbroken when he saw Zhang Xiaohua's appearance, he walked to the latter's front and patted his head, saying, "Zhang Xiaohua, I know you must have diligently learnt martial arts while nursing your injuries in the escort station and cannot wait to show the results of your effort to us. Even though I did not get to see the stances you have learnt, I believe that you have worked very hard and had managed to learn the complete stance. However, you are different from others, while ordinary people can remember

the martial art after learning it completely, you will need to try ten times, or hundred times. Nevertheless, you must not be discouraged because I believe that you will be able to learn them eventually.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes were slightly watery, and when he heard He Tianshu’s words, he wiped off his tears with his left hand and asked in disbelief, “Squad leader He, can I really learn them?”

He Tianshu nodded his head and said confidently, “Really!”

However, he thought secretly, “Dear heavens, please forgive me for lying to this boy, I am doing it for his good. Only you know that it is impossible for him right?”

Zhang Xiaohua was encouraged again and his earlier disappointment was washed completely away, he said smilingly, “Alright, I will work hard and not let squad leader He down.”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “That is how I feel too, I know that you won’t let me down.” While he thought, “I do not have any expectations for you to let down.”

The other three people who were standing at a side all said, “Xiaohua, you have to work hard, we will be watching after you.....”

After breakfast, He Tianshu was about to bring the four into the herb fields to work, but Zhang Xiaohua asked He Tianshu to be excused for a day. He Tianshu naturally did not reject the boy’s request, his injuries had only recovered recently and his hand should still be resting. Even though Zhang Xiaohua insisted on working the previous few days, He Tianshu could see for himself that the boy had difficulties using his right hand so he felt even worse secretly. Now that Zhang Xiaohua had asked to be excused on his own accord, He Tianshu was more than willing and he excused the boy for a few days.

Zhang Xiaohua was in his room alone deep in his thoughts. The two complete set of martial arts had already vanished from his head, while the incomplete set of martial arts stances had two new additions to its collection. Zhang Xiaohua seemed to have understood something, there were no difference in the martial arts he learnt from the manuals and from He Tianshu, it was not that he had suddenly changed and no longer forget any new martial art. Those martial arts

that remained in his head were only a memory, once he began practicing them, he would forget them just like how he forgot the fist martial arts He Tianshu taught, stance by stance. Sigh, perhaps he was really not material for practicing martial arts.

However, Zhang Xiaohua had another enlightenment. He already knew that everyone's path to learn martial arts is different, but had pushed back the thought when his head was flooded with the complete fist martial arts because he assumed that he had succeeded in finding a method for himself. However, it could not be considered a failure since he had returned to the starting point. From then on, he would have to practice honestly and patiently to create his own fist martial art although it might take him some time to do so.

Nevertheless, it was already very convenient to be able to learn martial arts straight from fist martial art manuals. It was like having a teacher who was always willing to guide him so he did not have to turn to other people for guidance. He also wondered, after practicing all the hundred plus fist martial arts in his memory, would they be able to form a complete fist martial arts when put together?

Sighing again, Zhang Xiaohua put aside his thoughts and left the room. He returned to the spot where he practiced martial arts the previous night, placed aside his distractions and began the “came to say hi again” process again.

Actually, for no matter what, knowing where the end goal lies was more important than the process itself. This principle is clearly demonstrated when Zhang Xiaohua was practicing all the martial arts diligently by himself. Zhang Xiaohua did not lack self-confidence in his own abilities and was thus not afraid of dreaming high goals. This was so despite the fact that he had nobody to direct his path, not to mention a person to teach him martial arts patiently stance by stance. Even He Tianshu who liked the boy especially would not put in blood and sweat into teaching him; after all, Zhang Xiaohua was not his own disciple or relative.

He Tianshu could teach Zhang Xiaohua only so much, and give the latter some pointers in his fist martial arts, and that was already considered very good. If not, this village youth would still be wielding his little shovel while building his dreams of entering Jianghu.

Little second Nie was the same.

Now that Zhang Xiaohua had found a suitable path for himself, it was like putting wings on a tiger so he became unstoppable.

He practiced another fist martial art in his memory stance by stance over and over again to wait for his own memory to change. However, to his surprise, his memory remained the same did not fade no matter what fist martial arts he practiced, and he felt that the whole matter was really strange.

Hence, he picked another fist martial art, but he only practiced the sequence twice this time just to familiarize himself with it, before beginning with the third martial art. For the third martial art, he practiced roughly ten times until he was sure that he was very familiar with it.

During this rest day, Zhang Xiaohua spent his entire free time practicing fist martial arts. From morning till night, he managed to practice ten over different fist martial arts while paying attention to any changes in the figure in his head.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua was jittery as he looked forward to going to the same spot under the tree to practice the previous fist martial arts. As expected, the fist martial arts that he practiced until he was familiar with had disappeared leaving behind only a few incomplete martial art stances that were carved into his memory and would not go away even if he tried. As for whether these few stances were the same as the original ones, it was not difficult to guess at all.

Zhang Xiaohua was not disappointed because of this result, rather, he became excited at the prospect of finding a new path. Whether this path to training martial arts is correct or not cannot be ascertained for now, but as the saying goes, whoever crosses the river need to step on rocks, so weren't his mistakes compensation for his learning fees? Zhang Xiaohua was still young and could afford to make such errors.

Since a martial art would become broken whether he trained once, thrice, ten times, or even dozens of times, Zhang Xiaohua would naturally change up his strategy and not train each fist martial art sequence redundantly up to ten times, and thus, he managed to finish three different fist martial arts in the morning.

While working on the herb fields in the day, Zhang Xiaohua did not officially began any strenuous activities and instead continued to follow behind little second Nie. Whenever he was feeling bored, he would do as he used to in the escort station and think of individual fist martial art stances to link together. However, perhaps because of his limited vocabulary, only the two stances which joined perfectly together could be linked, and this made Zhang Xiaohua feel secretly anxious if his choice in this martial arts path was correct.

During the evening, Zhang Xiaohua would repeat what he did in the morning and buried his head into his fist martial arts under the same tree and faraway from He Tianshu and the others.

However, Zhang Xiaohua realized that the fist martial arts he practiced in the morning were still complete in the evening, so it seemed that the change only occurred over the night.

Could there be something happening in the night?

Or was his brain just that stupid, and must not be given any time to rest?

Zhang Xiaohua felt suspicious for the first time.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua would enjoy this life of training martial arts in the morning and night and teaming up to work with the others in the herb fields for the rest of the day.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was enjoying this lifestyle of his, a pair of eyes was constantly supervising him secretly on the side. It was indeed the single-armed elder Yu whose qinggong was so superb that He Tianshu could not feel his presence, not to mention Zhang Xiaohua.

However, elder Yu was feeling very puzzled when he saw Zhang Xiaohua practice the many different martial arts that were spread around in Jianghu, he wondered where the boy managed to learn so many trash martial arts, could he not know that eating a bunch of rotten plums cannot be compared to a bite of fresh peach? What was the use of practicing so many trash martial arts?

Elder Yu shook his head because he really could not figure the boy out.

However, when he saw Zhang Xiaohua performed the same trash martial arts in incomplete stances that were full of mistakes in the next morning, elder Yu

nearly fell off the wall he was standing on, this... this kind of aptitude can be considered one-of-a kind indeed.

Elder Yu shook his head again and again.

The only thing that made him feel relieved was that Zhang Xiaohua would practice his fist martial arts under the tree as long as he had the free time to; it was a good display of his diligence and was truly praiseworthy.

However, what pittance could all this diligent efforts amount to?

Zhang Xiaohua's hard work was finally rewarded during one particular autumn day, while he was walking back to his own room and thinking of the different multiple incomplete martial arts stances, two of the stances suddenly linked perfectly together again. Zhang Xiaohua was so happy that he almost jumped on the spot, what did this mean?

This meant that his path was correct, and was a suitable path for him to train in martial arts.

Zhang Xiaohua was even more hardworking during his evening practice, he performed several different fist martial arts at one go. He only stopped not because of his fatigue as he was not tired, but because his right fingers were feeling sore and painful. If he could not clench his fist, his fist martial arts would become palm martial arts, and he did not dare to risk learning anything wrongly.

Hence, the days in autumn would pass like this, and the memories of complete fist martial art sequences would slowly disappear, while the number of incomplete and incorrect stances would increase, and the stances that could link together also increased. Under Zhang Xiaohua's persistent diligence, the progress he made also increased continuously.

As for He Tianshu and the rest, they had thoughts of asking Zhang Xiaohua when they saw the latter practiced on his own under the tree, but immediately extinguished the thought when they thought of his terrifying memory. After all, Zhang Xiaohua was only practicing fist martial arts so he would not be led astray in his practice and suffer any internal injuries, so they could well let him be.

Actually, He Tianshu might have other reasons as well, he was fully aware of the severity of Zhang Xiaohua's injury, and even though he was not a physician,

any person who is well-versed in martial arts would know the implications of such an injury, that was, his right hand was crippled.

Why?

A fist was used to attack the opponent, and if there was a fracture in one of the bones, a guard could be worn to protect the injured area when the fist was used as a weapon to impact onto the opponent's body. With Zhang Xiaohua's injury where the fractures were spread all over his palm, what type of force could be summoned to impact the opponent's body?

As the saying goes, one would lose eight hundred men to kill a thousand enemies.

If his fist had no power, how would he be able to pressure his opponent?

Furthermore, with Zhang Xiaohua's natural strength that could carry five hundred jin of force one hand, even before his fist could make the opponent surrender, perhaps the entire hand would shatter again from being unable to contain the might of his punches.

In fact, He Tianshu was in a dilemma of thinking if he should stop Zhang Xiaohua from practicing fist martial arts anymore.

What type of fist martial art could Zhang Xiaohua be practicing when he was by himself? There were only the same few broken fist martial art stances so it was unlikely that a sudden accident would occur. Thus, He Tianshu was too lazy to go over and he allowed Zhang Xiaohua to continue and play by himself.

Everything has an end, and on this particular night, Zhang Xiaohua finally exhausted all the fist martial arts in his memory. He secretly sighed in relief, but at the same time, there were huge gains as he had managed to link together many of the incomplete and incorrect fist martial arts stances together. There were four to five, even ten stances that linked perfectly together. Nevertheless, it was not easy to practice all these fist martial arts, and the effort that came with trying to link the broken martial art stances together also caused Zhang Xiaohua's head to hurt. Fortunately, that night was the last night so it was the moment of truth whether all the broken martial art stances could be linked together or not.

On that night, Zhang Xiaohua fell to sleep while thinking over these worrying thoughts.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua went to the same spot under the tree early in the morning to practice his fist martial arts. He was already familiar with the would-be results of his previous day's training; only five stances were filtered from all the fist martial arts he practiced the day before. Seeing that the sky was still brightening, Zhang Xiaohua took the opportunity of his remaining time alone to try and integrate the five stances into his fist martial arts which was already beginning to form a semblance of one.

The results led Zhang Xiaohua to feel joy and alarm; joyful because the first stances could perfectly join up with the rest of the stances, but alarmed because his fist martial arts still incomplete.

Zhang Xiaohua carefully studied the thoughts in his mind, his fist martial arts had a hundred and one stances but there were seven areas that were not joined together, although he was unsure if he only needed seven stances or more to complete it.

Zhang Xiaohua ran over these hundred and one martial art stances twice over his head and ascertain that they were firmly remembered, although he was unsure if it would still be the case the next day.

More importantly, Zhang Xiaohua had to consider where to find more fist martial art manuals to learn more fist martial art, thereby supplementing the gaps in his own self-invented fist martial art.

Chapter 110: Sword martial arts

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Sword martial arts

Zhang Xiaohua was in high spirits when he walked into the canteen, the results of his practice of that morning was not insignificant, and it was also the most important and fruitful practice he had since he began his journey in learning martial arts.

All the signs were pointing towards a beautiful future, and it was only lacking that little east wind at the back.

Suddenly, a human figure appeared in front of Zhang Xiaohua; the latter jumped in fright and quickly tried to regain his composure. Upon a closer inspection, he calmed down and said, “Elder Yu, even though your qinggong is so good, you do not have to show it off in front of me. As the saying goes, people can be frightened to death, my heart went into such a panic when you appeared so suddenly.”

Elder Yu pouted and said, “How has your training of the rubbish assortment of martial arts been going?”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he said loudly, “Elder Yu, that is my secret training, how can you peep at me? You could simply ask if you were interested I would have shown it to you once I am done. If you peep secretly without my knowledge, I will be very disappointed and have to charge you in front of our villa master.”

Elder Yu pursed his lips and said, “Even if you show me your martial art stances that are full of mistakes, I will be too lazy to see it, not to mention peep secretly at you. I am not that bored, you know.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “If you did not peep at me, how would you

know that I was training in fist martial arts? And how would you know that I was doing it in a random manner?”

Elder Yu replied, “Who cannot see you sneaking to the spot under the tree to practice martial arts every day? Furthermore, I already knew that you cannot remember any fist martial art in full, but I just didn’t want to say it out to embarrass you.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face flushed slightly, he originally wanted to share his progress with elder Yu but he could not be certain if he would still remember all the stances the next day, and whether or not what he did was right. Thus, he thought to himself, “Just bear with it alright?”

Zhang Xiaohua raised his head towards elder Yu and asked, “You can treat it as if I am warming up my bones, and should encourage me for doing so instead of beating me down. Anyway, what is the matter because little second Nie and the rest would finish all the food in the canteen if you don’t say it quickly?”

Elder Yu looked into Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes and said, “It is nothing much, I just wanted to tell you to wait for me at the same spot under the tree for me tonight, I have something to share with you.”

Zhang Xiaohua tilted his head and said, “Elder Yu, you have completely lost me. Won’t I still go to the same spot tonight even if you did not ask me to? Why is there a need for you to tell me especially?”

Elder Yu said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, “I am telling you so that you will be better prepared. As for the other reason why I am doing this, that is because there will be five spiced meats for breakfast today and little second Nie said that you would always snatch his portion, so when he met me earlier, he asked me to delay you until he finished his breakfast. I guess now should be the right time so you can head off now.”

Zhang Xiaohua gave elder Yu an impolite stare and said severely, “Elder Yu, you are good.”

After finishing his sentence, he rushed off to the canteen as though there was a mad dog chasing him from behind.

When evening came, Zhang Xiaohua waited at the same spot under the tree

for elder Yu. The latter had not said when he would arrive, so Zhang Xiaohua leisurely practiced the fist martial art which he created, and just as he was about to complete one cycle, he heard someone praising him from the side. As Zhang Xiaohua raised his head to look around, he saw that the person was elder Yu.

Elder Yu praised, "Zhang Xiaohua, you have really changed my expectation of you. I guess you still have some smarts around you to be able to shape those rubbish assortments of martial arts into something decent looking."

Zhang Xiaohua said somewhat embarrassingly, "Elder Yu, I had no other choice. As you mentioned in the morning, I really cannot remember a complete martial art so I had to mould something up for myself, at least it is better than not having any fist martial arts to practice."

Elder Yu nodded his head and said, "Your dedication towards martial arts is commendable. There are millions of path to success on this world, as long as you found your own path and persist on it, even if you fail to succeed in the end, at least there won't be any lingering regrets, and as you look back in the future, you can at least commend yourself for trying."

Zhang Xiaohua thanked the other party, "Many thanks for elder Yu's pointers, I will continue to work hard."

Elder Yu asked again, "Zhang Xiaohua, your fist martial art still seems to be quite choppy, and it cannot be practiced smoothly at one go like a sentence that is unfinished or stopped in the middle. Even though you do not have to follow a fist martial art sequence during a real exchange, practicing like this will not bring you the best results from your training."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, "Elder Yu, I have heard that the highest form of martial arts attainment is to fight without using fixed stance, this choppy martial art practice of mine may allow me to reach such a level"

Elder Yu laughed and said, "This level of not having any fixed form or stance is something out of what I know, it is a legendary stage that probably only a few in Jianghu have succeeded in reaching. Perhaps it is only a myth."

Zhang Xiaohua took the opportunity to ask the other party, "Elder Yu, do you have any fist martial art manuals? I want to read some, can you lend them to me?"

Elder Yu was surprised and he said, “Fist martial art manuals? I have, do you want to read them? I don’t think that is possible though, I thought you can’t read?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered, “Elder Yu, you are looking down too much on me. I may not be able to read in the past, but that does not mean I cannot read now.”

Elder Yu pondered before saying, “Oh right, you were reading a book when I went over to your room that night, have you taken the opportunity of nursing your injuries to learn to read?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and replied, “Elder Yu is smart.”

Elder Yu smiled back and said, “However, the vocabulary in fist martial art manuals are unlike normal books, knowing how to read other books does not necessarily mean that you will have no problems reading them.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Elder Yu can be at ease, I have read many of the fist martial art manuals in Lotus escort’s library so I should be able to understand.”

Elder Yu said, “Alright then, you can come to my room when you have the time, and I will find some fist martial art manuals for you to read.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Then I will thank elder Yu in advance.”

He then asked, “Oh right, elder Yu, why did you want to look for me tonight?”

Elder Yu looked at the round moon in the night sky and said in a nostalgic tone, “A person who has never entered the Jianghu would think that it is colourful over there, but a person who is rooted deeply in Jianghu would feel as though time passes too slowly. Zhang Xiaohua, did you know that there is a saying ‘a person’s body does not belong to himself if he is part of Jianghu’? Once you step foot into the Jianghu world, you will have to go where the Jianghu wind blows and can no longer go wherever you like.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand so he said, “Elder Yu, why are you telling me these, I have not even thought of entering the Jianghu yet.”

Elder Yu turned his gaze towards Zhang Xiaohua and said to the latter in a serious tone, “Zhang Xiaohua, if you want to learn martial arts, and if you want to master those fist martial arts, then it is unavoidable to be tainted by

bloodshed of Jianghu. Even though you are still young, you seemed to be determined on going on this path, unless you give up this thought now and pour your heart into working on the fields here in this mountain villa.”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and said, “I am learning martial arts because I want to protect my family, all these are too early for me to think about right now even though I am envious of the excitement and passion in Jianghu. Oh right, I don’t think your purpose for asking me out today would be just to tell me all these about Jianghu?”

Elder Yu said, “You don’t have to be impatient, Zhang Xiaohua, I am warning you of the cruelty of Jianghu because I want to remind you that if you continue to practice martial arts, you must have the mind-set of already being part of Jianghu, and if you are part of Jianghu, you will need to be prepared to safeguard your life at all times.”

Zhang Xiaohua was still feeling confused.

Elder Yu sighed and said, “Actually, the purpose of telling you so much is just to let you know that Jianghu is dangerous and cruel, so I hope you can give up on practicing martial arts. You still don’t seem to realize the seriousness of your right hand’s injury.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked anxiously, “How serious is it, elder Yu, didn’t the physician say that I could still continue to practice martial arts?”

Elder Yu said, “The physician did not lie to you, you can still practice martial art, but this right hand of yours is already crippled so it will be of no use in a real exchange with an opponent.”

Zhang Xiaohua was startled and he asked, “How can this be? Elder Yu, you have to explain it to me clearly.”

Thus, elder Yu laid out the seriousness of Zhang Xiaohua’s injury to the latter patiently.

Zhang Xiaohua’s face was ashen, he did not think that far ahead and assumed that his bones would heal until it was like before. Now that elder Yu had explained it to him, he realized that the matter was not as simple as he thought, if he could not use any force in his right fist, then naturally it can be considered

as crippled, so what was the use of continuing to practice fist martial arts?

Elder Yu stood quietly without a sound as he saw the look of understanding spreading across Zhang Xiaohua's face.

After Zhang Xiaohua seemed to have regained his composure again, he asked, "So, are you still planning to learn martial arts?"

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head with a determined look in his eyes, "Learning martial arts, why not? Haven't you just said that after one has found his way, he should persist on it to the end so at least there won't be regrets even if one does not success? Even if my right hand is crippled, I still have my left hand and with it, I will still be able to practice martial arts well and protect my family in the future."

Elder Yu did not reveal any hint of being surprised, he said, "You little child, still choosing to continue on a path with no good end. I have come here today for two reasons, the first is to explain the earlier to you, and since you do not want to give up on martial arts, I have another suggestion for you. Would you like to hear it?"

Zhang Xiaohua breathed in deeply and said, "Of course I will be willing to. I know that Elder Yu is doing all these for my own good."

Elder Yu said in a gratified tone, "Good that you know this, I myself do not know what is it about you that led me to be so concerned about your welfare."

He continued, "Actually, fists are not the only thing that can protect your life in Jianghu. There are more people using weapons, such as blades or spears, and since your fist is now crippled, you can consider practicing martial arts that use such weapons."

Zhang Xiaohua's eyes brightened and he said, "Oh right, elder Yu, you are awesome to have thought of this."

Elder Yu smiled bitterly, "This is only common knowledge in Jianghu, only an ignorant brat like you would not think of it. Don't worship me so easily, I will feel guilty of receiving your adoration like this."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "There is no choice, I can only look up to you. However, what weapon do you think I should train in?"

Elder Yu said, “Any weapon is fine actually, as long as you train hard in it. Even though there is the saying in Jianghu, “Spear is the king of a hundred weapons” and “hundred learn staffs, thousand learn blades, and ten thousand learn swords”, each person’s aptitude and opportunities are different, and they may not practice in only one type of weapon. In consideration of your right hand, I would feel that a staff is most suitable for you.”

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brow, “Staff martial art? I have not seen anyone who practiced in that yet. Elder Yu, where can I find a master to teach it to me?”

Elder Yu laughed and said, “With your aptitude and that right hand of yours, who would be willing to teach you staff martial arts? Why bother even thinking about it?”

Zhang Xiaohua flared up and said, “If no one would teach something as simple as staff martial arts, why do you even bother telling me so much in the first place?”

Elder Yu waited a moment for the boy to calm down before saying, “I do not know staff martial arts.”

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips and said, “How can you teach me if you don’t know staff martial arts?”

Elder Yu continued, “Our sect does not spread our martial arts to people who are not members.”

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed and he said, “This master, please accept a bow from your disciple.”

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohua knelt down and prepared to bow.

However, he was stopped by the elder Yu’s only arm who said, “Dream on, with an aptitude like yours, I will only be pissed to death while teaching you. Just forget it and let me live a few more years.”

After Zhang Xiaohua stood up again, elder Yu continued, “Even though I won’t accept you as a disciple, I know a sword martial art by coincidence and can consider imparting it to you.”

Zhang Xiaohua was elated and he said, “Really, elder Yu, you can teach me

sword martial arts?”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “This sword martial art is not a secret martial art from our sect so I naturally have the right to pass it down to whomever I want.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “Then I have to thank elder Yu in advance, Ah.....why is it only a single sword martial art stance? Can’t you teach me more of them? Please don’t be too stingy on me.”

Elder Yu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he said, “Zhang Xiaohua-ah, you are too ignorant of the Jianghu, I will have to enlighten you when I have the time. Sword martial arts are not like fist martial arts, fist martial arts are like sets of body sequences that contain offensive and defensive stances following each other, it can strengthen the body and some may even help to cultivate inner energy. However, sword martial arts are usually a complete set by itself, and they can be used from beginning to end like a fist martial art even if it only contains one stance.”

Zhang Xiaohua was still confused and he asked, “How does one fight with only one stance? It can’t possibly be like fist martial arts where I continue to hold in the same position?”

Elder Yu explained, “In an exchange using weapons, what determines victory is a single successful strike. If one had to clash multiple times with an opponent, then it will be a low-level fight. When experts spar with each other, they do not move against their opponents unless they are sure of victory within that single strike.”

Zhang Xiaohua was still in disbelief and he asked, “Then can the single stance that elder Yu teach be a high level strike?”

Elder Yu contained a smile as he said, “Whether or not it is a high level strike depends on the person using it. If it is me using it, then it will be a lethal sword martial art, but if the wielder was you, then perhaps it will only be a performance for people to enjoy.”

However, Zhang Xiaohua continued to ask, “I still do not understand, if it is only a single sword stance, how am I supposed to practice it?”

Elder Yu explained, “I am not certain if this sword stance is a complete martial

art or if it contains other stances, but I managed to learn nineteen variants of it during that time.”

Zhang Xiaohua was tongue-tied, he said, “One stance? Nineteen variations?”

Elder Yu laughed, “Yes, just this single stance has nineteen variations, all of which are offensive methods. However, I believe that there are also other ways and variations to use it, although I am still unaware of them.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “In that case, elder Yu, I want to ask if sword martial arts are different from fist martial arts in another way, that is, do sword martial art stances all contain different variations?”

Elder Yu nodded his head and said, “You are correct, sword martial arts are usually like that.”

Only then did Zhang Xiaohua realize why he was not able to understand the sword martial art manual despite comprehending all the fist martial art manuals in the escort station, there were so many important differences between the two that he was unaware of.

When he thought of how he was going to learn a profound sword martial art, Zhang Xiaohua became more excited and he said, “Elder Yu, can you teach it to me now?”

Elder Yu said, “I am only telling you about this tonight, as for teaching it to you, it will have to wait for another day. You cannot see the small variations of the sword stances in the night so it is better to learn during the day.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “In that case, elder Yu, can you show me the prowess of this sword martial art?”

Elder Yu pondered for a moment before taking out a long sword from its sheath using his only arm, and thrust it towards Zhang Xiaohua’s throat from a bizarre angle. Even though Zhang Xiaohua could feel the sword coming towards him from its original position, his body was unable to react in time and even before he could move, the sword tip already reached under his chin. Ignoring the threat, he threw his fist towards the sword and only saw that the sword retracted slightly before flashing again towards a different position and stopping in between his eyes.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw the sword tip right in front of him, he felt a sense of helplessness and realized then how frightening the prowess of a profound sword martial art was.

When Elder Yu saw that Zhang Xiaohua was motionless, he pulled back his sword and returned it into its sheath.

He asked, "So how was it, Zhang Xiaohua? Is this stance good?"

Zhang Xiaohua said snappily, "Of course it is good on a beginner like me, but how would I know its effectiveness on another expert? Like squad leader He."

Elder Yu said proudly, "In front of the sword martial art, He Tianshu and you are no different from each other."

Even more stars appeared in front of Zhang Xiaohua's eyes, he wanted to master this powerful thing as soon as possible, but elder Yu seemed to have anticipated his thoughts said calmly, "Since I have agreed, and even came over to find you, I will naturally teach this sword martial art to you. However, you will have to promise me two things."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Please say it, I will be willing even if I have to wash your socks for ten years."

Elder Yu said, "The first requirement is that you must not reveal the fact that I have taught you this sword martial art. Even if other people learnt that you know this sword martial art, you cannot say that you learnt it from me."

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand but he did not press further, he asked, "Then I will do as you say, and keep this from squad leader He and my second brother."

Elder Yu nodded his head.

Zhang Xiaohua said, "In that case, can I share this sword martial art with my second brother?"

Elder Yu pondered for a while and said, "This sword martial art is too sharp, it will cause turmoil over Jianghu if it was spread around too easily, so you better not share it with him."

Zhang Xiaohua agreed.

Elder Yu continued, “The second requirement is, since this sword martial art is so sharp, and it cannot be pulled back after using it, blood will be shed when you use it, so I hope that you do not perform this martial art so easily, and only use it in a life-threatening situation, understand?”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered deeply, and when elder Yu saw this, he said, “I believe you should have understood that this is a very powerful sword martial art. By teaching it to you, I hope that you can use it to protect your life, and have no intention of letting you use it to claim glory for yourself. I hope that you do not disappoint me and shed too much blood using this sword martial art.”

Zhang Xiaohua sincerely dropped to his knees and bowed, “Elder Yu, I understand your wishes and will commit what you told me tonight to my memory.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Actually, I am already relieved by your disposition. Seeing how you would wake up early in the morning and practice until nightfall, even though your aptitude is not good, I can tell that you are not afraid of hardships so I believe that you will still be able to accomplish something in the future. Hence, by teaching you this sword martial art, I will at least wipe off the dust on this pearl. However, when you enter the Jianghu in the future, I hope that you use your mind to see the situation and not be too rash when acting, because what you see before you may not be reality.”

Zhang Xiaohua was confused upon hearing, what one sees before him may not be reality?

Chapter 111: Sword stance

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Sword stance

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua returned to the same spot under the tree. Elder Yu had not arrived so Zhang Xiaohua took the initiative and began to practice the incomplete fist martial art of his. After knowing that elder Yu would teach him a sword martial art, Zhang Xiaohua was no longer as concerned towards whether he would remember this fist martial art, like a child who has lost interest in his toy when someone gave him a better one. Even if the old toy disappeared, the child would not feel as upset as before.

Even though Zhang Xiaohua has this mentality, his heart still felt excited after he finished practicing one cycle of the fist martial art that he compiled together the previous day. It was, after all, through much hard work and accumulated experiences that he completed this incomplete fist martial art, and he doubted that he will ever forget it after going through what he had to create it. Zhang Xiaohua almost felt like shouting towards the heavens, that he, Zhang Xiaohua, had finally learnt a martial art that was almost complete!

Furthermore, there was a martial art expert who had offered to teach him a sword art which was so profound that he had not even dreamed of before, such an opportunity was too good to be even put into words, could his good karma accumulated over the past ten plus years of his life exploded in that moment?

He raised his head and looked at the sun that was beginning to rise, then took a deep breath of the fresh morning air; this, this is the fortunate life of the village youth Zhang Xiaohua.

Just as he was drunk in the moment, a human shadow flitted past. Zhang Xiaohua was frightened out of his wits, and although he did not see the other

party clearly, he could tell from his entrance that it was elder Yu.

Indeed, before the person appeared before him, elder Yu's voice called out, "Zhang Xiaohua, you are so early today?"

Zhang Xiaohua said respectfully, "Yes, elder Yu, I have already practiced one round of my fist martial art."

Elder Yu said, "Hehe, you woke up pretty early today. It seems that I am not mistaken about you being able to take hardships."

Zhang Xiaohua thought secretly, "It is not that I don't wish to sleep more, but I cannot go back to sleep the moment the sun rises. Do you think I do not want to sleep?"

Elder Yu naturally could not hear Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts, he said, "Actually, even though you came much earlier than me, the polite reply you should have given was 'elder Yu, I just came as well'. In that way, I would be able to tell that you are a sensible kid that is considerate of others. This will be useful when you meet a lady later, so you must remember my words well."

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his chin in confusion, but he carved the words into his memory.

Elder Yu was satisfied with Zhang Xiaohua's response and he said, "Alright, let's talk less and begin. Come, let's go over there. This sword martial art of mine is extraordinary and we cannot let He Tianshu and the rest learn it sneakily."

After finishing his words, he brought Zhang Xiaohua through several bends and to behind a tree, so even for He Tianshu and the rest to see them, their eyesight would have to be able to curve many times.

Once both of them got their feet on the ground, elder Yu said in a strict voice, "Zhang Xiaohua, I have already told you the danger of this sword martial art, do you still remember my words?"

Zhang Xiaohua kept away his other ideas and followed, "Yes, elder Yu, I already remembered them and will do as you say in the future."

Elder Yu continued, "This sword martial art was obtained by me through a tattered sheepskin, and I do not know its name so let's just call it nameless

sword stance. Actually, a simple sword martial art is no different from a simple fist martial art in that they are helpless against vast inner energy. However, sword martial arts have an advantage, if they are used well, a good sword martial art may be able to break through the defence put up using inner energy. This sword martial art that I am about to teach you is not like any others, it has its own set of formulas that can stimulate your inner energy and assist your sword and stature, thereby seizing the best opportunity to attack.”

After listening up to here, Zhang Xiaohua interrupted to ask, “However, elder Yu, I do not have any inner energy.”

Elder Yu wrinkled his brow and said, “Do not interrupt me when I am talking, it will break my line of thought and once I forget one or two lines of advice, it will be easy for you to be led astray so do not blame me when that happens in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua tightened his lips and nodded his head energetically to show his understanding.

Elder Yu recited in satisfaction the popular principle of the way of sword, “To practice profound martial art, point the blade to castrate oneself.”

Upon hearing his words, Zhang Xiaohua felt that it sounded profound but could not understand a single word of its meaning. However, if he could not understand the first principle of the sword, how would he be able to practice the other following sword principles? He could not help but feel worry welling up his heart and used his left hand to cover his mouth while he waved his right hand about. When elder Yu saw his reaction, he wrinkled his brow and asked, “Zhang Xiaohua, what is the matter again?”

Zhang Xiaohua put down his left hand, took a deep breath, and said, “Elder Yu, what does it mean to castrate oneself?”

Elder Yu was surprised and asked, “What do you want to castrate yourself?”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised as well and he said, “The first sword principle you mentioned was ‘to practice profound martial art, point the blade to castrate oneself, isn’t it?’”

Upon hearing this elder Yu flushed and slapped his forehead, he said

sheepishly, “My bad, my bad, I have read too much wuxia novels and mixed it up with reality. I will repeat what I say from the beginning again.”

Hence, elder Yu repeated the hard to pronounce sword formulas again. There were not many, only about ten plus words, but Zhang Xiaohua did not understand any of them.

Elder Yu did not explain any further, but he instructed Zhang Xiaohua to memorize them deeply.

After the previous accident, how would Zhang Xiaohua dare to believe the other party’s words completely? Elder Yu was forced to repeat the sword principle three more times before Zhang Xiaohua was able to recite the principle, causing the former to nod his head in relief.

In this world, there were many things that seem easy when other people were doing it, but when it came to one’s turn, they would find it hard to replicate the action. Elder Yu explained the sword stance twice, and even though Zhang Xiaohua could understand his instructions, when it was his turn to pick up the tree branch and demonstrate the stance, he was unable to satisfy elder Yu’s requirement no matter how hard he tried.

After several few attempts, elder Yu got frustrated and looked up at the sky before saying, “Zhang Xiaohua, we’ll stop here for today. Think about it carefully when you go back, try to figure out about how the sword stance changes, and remember to recite the sword principle which you just memorized.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt that he was put in a difficult position and he asked, “I know how the sword stance should move so I will naturally practice on that, but I do not understand this sword principle at all.”

Elder Yu disagreed and said, “A sword’s principle is the essence of the sword stance movement. Once you grasped some understanding of the sword stance, I will explain the sword principle in detail to you. This essence is related to inner energy, since you do not have any inner energy, saying anymore will not only be useless but counterproductive. Hence, you should just memorize it well.”

Zhang Xiaohua then understood and he nodded in agreement.

However, Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “Elder Yu, you promised to lend me

some fist martial art manuals yesterday, when will be a good time to find you for them?”

Elder Yu pondered for a moment and said, “Once you understand the movement of the sword stance. If you read other fist martial art manuals during this period, it might distract you from your practice of sword martial arts instead. Let’s wait until I see some improvement in your sword martial arts first.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt that the other party was reasonable, and furthermore, this matter of completing his fist martial arts was not something he could finish in a day, he had waited several months and was not anxious to complete it anytime soon.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua continuously revised and pondered over the sword principle throughout the rest of the day. He would think of the sword stance movement once he had the time, and when he was idling in his room, he would pick up a tree branch and practice relentlessly. Unfortunately, he was still unable to completely replicate the movement.

Actually, since this was Zhang Xiaohua’s first contact with a sword, it was normal for him to not be able to understand it well. Furthermore, his right hand was injured and his finger’s functions were not smooth like normal, so he was unable to control the direction and produce the power required, which was why his first step into sword martial arts was so challenging for him.

After dinner, taking the opportunity of some light before the sun fully set, elder Yu slowly demonstrated the sword stance movement again while explaining in detail the places to take note of. Zhang Xiaohua listened carefully and when put together with his own efforts during the day, there was some resemblance during his own demonstration although elder Yu still shook his head in dissatisfaction.

Zhang Xiaohua practiced for another set of time but there was still no improvement, and it was unavoidable for him to feel slightly discouraged. Looking at his right hand, he thought, “Could this hand really be crippled? From the way elder Yu explained, this sword stance movement is not too difficult so why am I not able to do it well?”

Following which, his eyes brightened and he asked, “Elder Yu, look, my right

hand is not very flexible so can I use my left hand instead?”

Elder Yu did not nod like how Zhang Xiaohua anticipated the former to, he said softly, “Zhang Xiaohua, are you trying to circumvent this little obstacle because you cannot overcome it? If so, there is no need to learn this sword martial art anymore, why bother going through all this trouble?”

Zhang Xiaohua objected, “It’s not like this, elder Yu, I only felt that my right hand is not flexible enough to move the tree branch according to my wishes so I wanted to try with my left hand instead.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Actually, I have already considered that problem before, but among the sword martial arts in Jianghu, most are intended for right-hand use and there are very few left handed sword martial arts. This sword martial art is also intended for right-hand use, and the sword manual that I obtained is also meant for such. Furthermore, the meridians in the right and left hand are quite different, the inner energy movement described in the sword manual is meant to be used in the right hand only. Look at me, where do I have a left hand to demonstrate to you? Without my left arm, I naturally cannot use my right arm to teach you to use your left arm instead.”

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s silent response, elder Yu continued, “That is why I cannot teach you any left handed sword martial art. Actually, I have another reason for teaching you sword martial arts.”

Zhang Xiaohua was confused and he asked, “What is it?”

Elder Yu bent his head solemnly and said, “This sword martial art requires the palm and wrist, and since your right hand is injured, it may not recover if you do not practice using it regularly. By teaching you this sword martial art, you will be forced to practice moving your right hand in the wide range of possible motions, and as long as you keep up in you practice diligently, perhaps the heavens will be kind enough to let you regain back your old condition? If you back off now because of the difficulties you are currently facing, then not only will you not go anywhere with your sword martial art, even your fist martial arts will not amount to much in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua then understood and he bent his body and bowed, “Elder Yu, many thanks for your kind intentions. I will practice well and not disappoint

you.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Alright, there is no need to become so polite. Use your own abilities to practice well.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head and picked up the tree branch again to practice the movement repeatedly, he slowly immersed himself into his training and did not notice when elder Yu left.

While Zhang Xiaohua was in the midst of his training, a tree branch suddenly fell and Zhang Xiaohua was shocked out of his preoccupation. He felt pain in his right hand, and it was not just in his wrist but throughout his fingers as well. Zhang Xiaohua could not help but worry, did his injuries reopen again?

Hence, he stood there not daring to practice any further.

After waiting for a long while, the pain slowly subsided.

Zhang Xiaohua knew that while the injury did not reopen, he had to limit his practice to ensure that he did not overstrain himself. He had overworked his right hand that day, and had to be more careful in the future, if he were to continue this bad habit, not only would there not be any results from his training, his fingers and bones would be at greater risk of fracturing again.

Since he could not practice the sword stance movement, Zhang Xiaohua thought back to the fist martial art which he created. Hence, he stood back in the position and performed each and every of the hundred and one fist martial art stances, and even though it did not flow as smoothly, it still had close resemblance to a real fist martial art.

After finishing his fist martial art practice, he saw that the time was getting late so he used his left arm to carry the tree branch and walked back to his own room.

Zhang Xiaohua continued to swing the branch non-stop as he walked, and suddenly, his heart stirred. Even though elder Yu did not allow him to use his left hand to replace his sword martial art practice, the former did not obstruct him from using his left hand totally. Even though the meridians in his left hands were different, since he had no inner energy anyway, there was no use for the sword principle so he could practice performing the sword stance movement using his

left hand as well. Elder Yu did not teach him the left hand sword movement because the former did not have a left hand and was unable to experience the hand movements personally, but why must he restrict himself just because of this?

The more Zhang Xiaohua thought about it, the more excited he became. He looked around his surroundings and after feeling that there was no one around, he placed the oil lamp at a side and thought back carefully about elder Yu's pointers before using his left hand to perform the movement slowly.

After relying on his left hand for his daily functions over this several months, even though Zhang Xiaohua was not born left-handed, his flexibility was as close to a left handed person. Under elder Yu's instructions and guidance in the day, Zhang Xiaohua's left hand slowly accustomed itself to performing the sword stance movement. Even though the first try was quite clumsy and choppy, the following few tries flowed as smoothly as a river.

This result was out of Zhang Xiaohua's expectations, and he felt elated beyond words as though he had found a new path to practice sword martial arts by himself. After he practiced a few more times to ascertain that he could perform the movement, he picked up his oil lamp and returned back to his room to rest.

When Zhang Xiaohua woke up the next morning, his first thought was to share his happy findings with elder Yu. However, when he started to practice again, he realized that the same problem with his fist martial arts had reoccurred.

That is, his left hand's performance of the sword stance movement was no longer the same as what elder Yu had taught, there were several different points although the fortunate thing this time was that Zhang Xiaohua did not forget anything.

Upon seeing his sword martial art that had gone astray, Zhang Xiaohua was in silent contemplation, and his thought of sharing the good news with elder Yu had vanished. Forget it, rather than to let other people laugh at him, it was better if he could cope with it himself.

When he thought of elder Yu who would be arriving soon, Zhang Xiaohua stopped his practice with his left hand and warmed his muscles up by practicing the hundred and one fist stances instead. Just as he was in the middle doing so,

elder Yu arrived.

Elder Yu inquired on Zhang Xiaohua's training during the previous night, and the latter honestly reported on the pain which he felt in his right hand, and although he opened his mouth, the matter about of left hand was not said eventually.

Upon hearing Zhang Xiaohua's words, elder Yu's expression became solemn and he held on to Zhang Xiaohua's right hand to inspect it before saying, "Mm, you have overworked yourself last night just as you expected. Your right hand is slightly stiff so we shall let it rest, continue to ponder about the movement in the day and we will practice again in the evening."

After finishing his sentence, he reminded Zhang Xiaohua not to practice any sword martial art in the day again and floated off probably in the direction of the canteen.

Seeing that he did not have to practice sword martial arts that morning, Zhang Xiaohua could only continue on training his fist martial art, and as he practiced the hundred and one stances a few more times, his movements began to flow better and it reaffirmed his idea to complete the fist martial art and rebuilt his anticipation to practice the whole martial art in its complete form.

After finishing his practice, Zhang Xiaohua looked up at the sky and upon seeing that there was still some time before breakfast, he returned his thoughts onto his left arm and the sword martial art. Moving on an impulse, Zhang Xiaohua hid himself behind some trees as he used his left hand to perform the modified sword martial art in his memory.

As he practiced over and over again, his movements became more fluid until as though it was of the same standard as elder Yu's. Just as Zhang Xiaohua as submerged in his own world of practicing, he suddenly felt as though there was some warm energy flowing from his left hand into the sword stance movement. Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he immediately stopped to observe the feeling, but it disappeared as fast as it came.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua slowly performed the movement again but the feeling did not resurface as though it was his own imagination. Zhang Xiaohua shook his head as he thought that he probably mistook the feeling.

However, as Zhang Xiaohua continued to practice the sword stance movement again, he accidentally encountered the same feeling again, and then realized that it was not just his imagination. Thus, he thought back carefully as he tried to link this warm energy flow with the speed of sword stance movement while he performed it.

Just as he was trying out the sword stance movement with varying speeds to further investigate the warm energy, a loud voice suddenly disrupted his thought process, "Zhang Xiaohua, where are you?"

Upon hearing the voice, Zhang Xiaohua immediately recognized it as little second Nie and felt surprised, why had the other person came all of a sudden?

When he walked out of the forest, he realized that the sun had already passed three poles so it was time for them to prepare to head towards the herb fields, but he had not had his breakfast yet.

Upon seeing He Tianshu's concerned expression, Zhang Xiaohua said sheepishly, "Squad leader He, about this, I was practicing.....fist martial arts in the forest and lost track of the time."

He Tianshu said, "Zhang Xiaohua, do you know that rushing things will not be beneficial to you? Rome is not built in one day, you have to learn to be realistic and take little steps towards your goal. While I respect your diligence, but overworking your body is something I do not approve of. Were you still practicing your fist martial arts during the days when you were in the forest alone?"

Zhang Xiaohua pondered slightly before replying, "I guess so."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "I know that you are afraid of being teased at while practising those incomplete martial arts of yours. Just practice if you want to, but be mindful of your own health. Your right hand is still not completely recovered so you must take appropriate breaks to not overwork it, or else you might cripple yourself personally and never be able to practice martial arts again."

Zhang Xiaohu replied respectfully, "I understand, squad leader He, I will be more careful in the future."

He Tianshu patted his shoulders and said, "Alright, as long as you know it yourself. Don't be embarrassed in the future and come train with us, we promise not to tease you again."

When Zhang Xiaohua looked at the other three people who were standing at a side, he could not help but break out into a smile and said, "It is alright, squad leader He, I will still practice on my own in the future."

He Tianshu said, "Fine, everything is up to you. I have already told little second Nie to bring some breakfast over to your room, so hurry and eat some before heading to the herb fields to work."

Chapter 112: Change

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Change

His casual tone and normal words which rang in Zhang Xiaohua's ear caused a wave of warm sensation to flow over the body. Even though it was only a common type of concern, as the saying goes, "an object is less important than its worth compared to something else", the way He Tianshu and the others treated Zhang Xiaohua was a vast drip from how Zhang Xiaohua was treated by the azure robed with little hats when he was still with them. Hence, it was no wonder why Zhang Xiaohua was feeling so touched at the moment.

After reminding Zhang Xiaohua, He Tianshu and the rest hurried off as there was still work to be done in the herb fields and it would still run smoothly even without Zhang Xiaohua's participation. The herbs that have yet to sprout remained the main problem, it was like a mountain pressing onto He Tianshu's heart that did not go away for as long as the herbs refused to sprout.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw that they had walked away, he hurriedly rushed back to his room. Even though the food in his room was simple, he ate them with relish before leaving to do his own self-appointed work.

During his afternoon break, Zhang Xiaohua idled by himself in his own room. He picked up the tree branch and carefully repeated his attempts in the morning to catch hold of the warm feeling again. Indeed, when his speed was neither too fast nor slow, the warm flow of energy immediately appeared again; Zhang Xiaohua developed some sort of understanding. Even though he was unaware of the source of this energy, it was certain that it existed and that the sword stance movement was also best executed at the speed when it occurred!

With this understanding, Zhang Xiaohua would continuously practice the

sword stance movement in that particular speed and the warm energy would continue to resurface. Zhang Xiaohua then realized that ever since he began practicing the sword stance movement, the warm energy would always originate from his shoulder and flow towards his palm and by the time the sword stance movement was fully executed, the warm energy would reach his left hand and dissipate from the tree branch.

After practicing for the whole afternoon, Zhang Xiaohua finally managed to carve the body motion into his memory, and as long as he wished to, he was able to perform the sword stance movement while causing the warm energy to appear.

As for the practice in the evening, the outcome exceeded Zhang Xiaohua's expectations. Under elder Yu's guidance, Zhang Xiaohua initially thought that he would fail again when he performed the sword stance movement again with his right hand, but perhaps because of the practice he did with his left hand, his right hand managed to achieve the right speed and he successfully demonstrated the movement, although there were still minute details that have to be corrected because Zhang Xiaohua's right fingers were not nimble enough due to his injury.

Elder Yu was also surprised, when he saw Zhang Xiaohua's practice in the morning, and given what he knew of the latter's aptitude, he only expected the boy to learn the sword stance movement after a few days. However, from the results of that day, it seemed that he had underestimated the boy. Elder Yu was in high spirits as he instructed Zhang Xiaohua to perform the stance again, and after confirming that he had master the movement, he said, "Zhang Xiaohua, you have actually exceeded my expectations because I did not expect you to master the movement so soon. However, your speed is still not something to be proud of because I managed to master this movement myself within half a day, and my aptitude is only considered ordinary in Jianghu. If it was someone else with good aptitude, I believe that he will be able to master the movement after two demonstrations."

Zhang Xiaohua did not feel any hint of pride or complacency so he immediately said, "Elder Yu, please be relieved. I am aware of my own aptitude, and this is only result of much practice."

Elder Yu was satisfied and he said, “Actually, everyone has their own limitations so it is fine if you did your best. I believe that you have gone through much difficulty to learn this first stance. Anyway, now that you have mastered the first variation, I shall teach you the second variation next. However, be careful not to overexert yourself today, and as the saying goes, “haste makes waste”, so you have to be mindful of your injury.”

Zhang Xiaohua was naturally very happy when he heard that he could learn the second variation so he did not place too much importance on the rest of the other party’s warning.

Actually, elder Yu planned to teach Zhang Xiaohua the second variation in the next morning, but he was feeling happy when he saw that Zhang Xiaohua had managed to learn the first variation so he decided to seize the momentum and the fact that there was still some moonlight to demonstrate the second variation to the boy in the forest. After Zhang Xiaohua was shown the demonstration, elder Yu gave a detailed explanation and upon seeing the former’s eyebrow smoothing, he knew that the boy had understood so he demonstrated the movement a second time slowly before passing the ball back to the boy.

Even though there were supposedly nineteen variations of the sword stance movement, they were all built from the same foundation and thus, the first sword stance was the hardest to learn. After passing that hurdle, the other stances would naturally be easier to master, which was why the time elder Yu spent on explaining the second stance was much less than the first time.

Unfortunately, elder Yu had overestimated Zhang Xiaohua’s comprehension abilities. Even though Zhang Xiaohua knew how to perform the movement, and he could be said to know how to do it in his heart, but the tree branch which was in his hand refused to move the way it was supposed to any according to the requirements by the elder.

As elder Yu brows began to wrinkle, Zhang Xiaohua guiltily put down the tree branch because his right hand started to hurt again from its injury. Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s dejected expression, elder Yu patted the boy’s shoulders and said, “It is alright, just think about it again in your mind. This is not your first obstacle after all, so just rest and continue with the training again tomorrow.”

After finishing his sentence, he left Zhang Xiaohua behind and turned around to leave first.

Upon seeing elder Yu depart, Zhang Xiaohua's feeling quite unsatisfied in his heart, after all, which person would like to be looked down upon by others? Even though he was aware of his own poor aptitude and can remain calm even when being told the fact over again, he could not remain completely nonchalant in his own heart. Hence, he picked up the tree branch again, but this time, he had learnt to be smart about it and did not use his right hand to perform the movement. Instead, Zhang Xiaohua used his left hand to pick up the tree branch, and then visualized how the movement should be done using the other hand in his head before performing the movement repeatedly. Just like that, he became familiar with the amended sword stance movement and like the previous variation, the warm sensation appeared again after some practice, just like what had happened earlier in the afternoon.

Zhang Xiaohua was overjoyed, he knew that he had found his own path to train so he borrowed the light from the moon and continued to practice throughout the night.

After mastering the second variation, he went back to practice the first variation as though elder Yu has been teaching the left hand stances to him all this while.

On the next day, Zhang Xiaohua began with his hundred and one fist martial art stance and then followed up his practice with the two sword stance variations while waiting for elder Yu to arrive. However, after waiting for a while, the other party did not arrive so Zhang Xiaohua grew impatient.

After a night of rest, Zhang Xiaohua's right hand had fully recovered from its pain so he picked up the tree branch again, and like how he memorized the sword stance variation, he executed the second sword stance variation using his right hand at the same speed as before. It was strange, because no matter how hard he tried to perform the sword stance movement with his right hand during the previous night, he was able to do so after a night of rest even though it was not as smooth as it could be.

It then dawned on Zhang Xiaohua that for him to learn this sword stance

variations, he almost had to practice it with his left hand first until he managed to master the movement before his right hand could pick it up. It was really strange, was the cause due to the injury in his right hand?

During the night when elder Yu tested Zhang Xiaohua on his understanding again, the former also felt strange and his face flushed slightly. After all, a student's progress is highly dependent on the teacher, and the way he has been teaching Zhang Xiaohua seemed to be ineffective, perhaps he was really not suited to take on a disciple. For such a simple sword stance variation, why was he unable to explain it clearly to the boy? And Zhang Xiaohua even needed to go back and reflect upon it himself before being able to perform the movement.

Hence, elder Yu asked in a slightly embarrassed tone, "Zhang Xiaohua, about this..... is my teaching method not good?"

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he said, "No, elder Yu, your teaching is really good."

Elder Yu said, "Sigh, don't just say it for the sake of being polite. The few disciples that I have taught before all did not learn well and they turned out not being able to accomplish much in Jianghu. Now when I am teaching you a few sword variations, you still do not understand my instructions."

Zhang Xiaohua was even more confused and he scratched his head like a newly shaven monk, he said, "Elder Yu, I am already very grateful that you are willing to teach me sword martial arts. If I cannot pick them up, then it is due to my poor aptitude, I remembered my second brother saying that other people might take on demonstration to learn a new move, but I would need ten, twenty or even a hundred to do the same thing."

Upon hearing his words, elder Yu felt deep approval and he said, "You are absolutely correct, the people in Jianghu are all different, while some may be like phoenix feathers and dragon scales, the likes of you and me are just ordinary people so we naturally have to spend more effort than the rest to produce good results. Zhang Xiaohua, you have done very well."

After that, elder Yu no longer doubt his teaching method or Zhang Xiaohua's comprehension abilities, and like the previous days, he would explain the sword stance variation in detail before demonstrating it slowly until Zhang Xiaohua

seemed as though he understood the former. Then, he would leave first and allow Zhang Xiaohua to practice by himself, and would not appear in the morning to let Zhang Xiaohua experience it himself again before testing the latter on his progress in the night.

Just like that, time flew by and Zhang Xiaohua managed to learn at a pace of one sword variation each day until he finished sixteen of the variations.

A problem occurred during the seventeenth variation. After elder Yu finished his explanation and demonstration, Zhang Xiaohua memorized his teachings and tried it out with his left hand, but the warm feeling did not appear no matter how hard he practiced. Zhang Xiaohua attributed the problem to the speed of his execution, and he repeated the motion in hundreds of ways but was still unable to execute it successfully.

After Zhang Xiaohua practiced by himself for two days but still not being able to master the seventeenth variation, elder Yu pondered and guessed that the reason might be due to his right hand that was still injured and not as nimble as a normal person. Hence, he moved on to teach the eighteenth and nineteenth variations.

Indeed, like elder Yu has expected, Zhang Xiaohua was unable to master the last two variations as well, and after being troubled over it for a few days, elder Yu called Zhang Xiaohua into the forest and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, I have already taught you these nineteen variations of the sword martial art. Actually, I am already satisfied that you were able to learn sixteen of them, and to be honest, I had only expected you to master half of them so your results now have already exceeded my expectations.”

Upon hearing elder Yu’s words, Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly sour but the truth was unavoidable so he could not deny anything.

Elder Yu continued to say, “For the last three variations, you are already familiar with how they should be executed so you can try them again once your right hand fully recovers its mobility. The reason why I taught you this sword martial art is so that you can protect your life, if you angered any martial art expert, these sixteen variations should be able to allow you to keep your life. In addition, I hope you bear in mind that what you learnt was only the surface of

this sword martial art, you must still recite and memorize the sword principles so that if you ever pick up an inner energy cultivation method, you can complement your inner energy with this sword martial art to display its true prowess.”

Zhang Xiaohua could not help but ask, “What does its true prowess look like?”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Watch me.”

After finishing his sentence, he picked up and his sword and pierced through a large tree, causing the sharp pointed edge of the sword enter about thirty percent deep into the trunk Then, elder Yu circulated his inner energy and repeated the same movement and the sword seemed to pierce right through the entire trunk.

Zhang Xiaohua could not help but gasp in amazement, the difference was far too vast.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s reaction, elder Yu naturally understood the former’s thoughts and said, “Now you have seen it right, Zhang Xiaohua. Without inner energy, one will only be a frog in its well and he would never comprehend the might of inner energy. Even if you were to learn the top sword martial art in the world, the most profound sword martial arts would only be an empty shelf and without inner energy to complement its movement, no one would consider you as a martial art expert.”

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s apparent disappointment, he continued, “I know that you wish to learn inner energy, but I am unable to teach it to you. I truly hope that you will be able to learn a profound inner energy cultivation method in the future. Alright, this is all that I am able to teach you, so practice it well and hopefully it will be of use to you in the future.”

After finishing his sentence, he shook his sleeves and turned around to prepare to leave.

Zhang Xiaohua immediately called out loudly, “Elder Yu.”

Elder Yu turned around and asked, “What is it?”

Zhang Xiaohua opened his mouth, and a moment later, he said, “Thank you, elder Yu.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, "It is my pleasure, Zhang Xiaohua, now practice well, I hope that you can succeed."

After which, he turned around and flew away.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at elder Yu's disappearing back and his heart was brimming with gratitude towards the latter. Even though they were not relatives or had any other connection, and could not be counted as close acquaintances, the other party was so kind that he taught him a sword martial art and even though he did not take it to heart, how could Zhang Xiaohua forget this favour?

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua wanted to tell elder Yu about the matter of him using his left hand, but when the words reached his mouth, he was unable to say them out somehow. Those sixteen sword movement variations have turned completely unrecognizable in his left hand; so would the latter think that he was not useless if he told the matter to him? That Zhang Xiaohua was able to learn and apply the knowledge to wield the movement in his left hand? However, when he thought back to the prowess of the movement when elder Yu activated his inner energy, he finally decided not to as the little smart of his really amounted to nothing much in comparison.

Nevertheless, he really wanted to ask elder Yu about the warm sensation he felt.

After standing in daze for a moment, elder Yu had already left faraway and only then did Zhang Xiaohua regained his senses. He picked up the tree branch and continued to practice the variations by himself in the forest, but his heart was feeling empty and his right hand was turning sore. Hence, he switched back to his left hand and performed the unrecognizable sword stance movements, the sensation he felt in his hand was the exact opposite, the warm feeling was comfortable and after the sixteen variations were modified by Zhang Xiaohua, they came together to become as fluid as a dance when the latter ran through the variations from the first to the sixteenth. Adding on his agile footwork changes, it really looked like a legitimate sword martial art, while Zhang Xiaohua was completely intoxicated in the mood as he performed the entire sequence until he lost track of the number of times he practiced. It was as though he entered an entirely new and calm state of mind, in which his left hand only served to hold the sword and Zhang Xiaohua was living only for the sword

martial art. Time flew by and after practicing for who knows how long, Zhang Xiaohua felt a stifling sensation in his chest which he wanted to throw up to get rid of but was unable to. However, while in the midst of his sword dance, he seemed to have found an outlet and opened his mouth to breathe out deeply as though he was spilling it out, and along with the variation of his sword stances, his left hand thrust the tree branch towards a large tree. With a “Pa” sound, the tree branch struck the tree trunk before breaking into pieces and dropping onto the floor.

Zhang Xiaohua woke up from his dream-like state and he looked at the tree branch that was gripped tightly on his left hand, and then towards the part of the branch that was still embedded in the tree trunk in complete disbelief.

When elder Yu used his sword to pierce into thirty percent of the tree trunk, Zhang Xiaohua believed that he was able to use his own strength to pierce through half of the tree trunk. However, when elder Yu activated his inner energy, Zhang Xiaohua naturally was unable to follow the former so he never dreamt of being able to pierce the tree branch so deeply into the trunk, was he considered a martial art expert now?

However, when he walked up to the front and used his thumb and index finger to pinch the tree branch that was embedded into the trunk, it came off with little force and when he inspected the mark closely, he realized that the whole he made was very shallow and could only be considered as a dent on the bark. Zhang Xiaohua could not help but laugh at himself, he was like a poor idiot who picked up two coins and thought that he was the richest man on earth without knowing that these two coins were but a joke to the real rich man. When he thought that he became an expert and could pierce the tree with a tree branch, a second look showed that it only left a small scratch on the tree bark.

Shaking his head, Zhang Xiaohua threw the tree branch he was holding on to aside.

Feeling that the night had become late, he lighted the lamp and walked back slowly to his room.

Hence, only a small little twig was left on the tree trunk.

When the pitiful Zhang Xiaohua was feeling guilty over his initial pride, he was

ignorant that he had really overlooked his own abilities. Even for elder Yu, he would not dare to say that he was able to use a tree branch to leave pierce through a tree, and if the former had seen Zhang Xiaohua's "sword", his eyeballs would drop in surprise. Unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua only noticed the sharpness of elder Yu's sword, and even though he knew that a tree branch was not able to pierce through the trunk so easily, but this sudden disappointment blinded his rationality and judgement in his own abilities. Sigh, as the saying goes, the minor details determines the success. Zhang Xiaohua was still so young and immature, and the road in front of him was still quite far ahead.

Only, these thoughts did not come across to the Zhang Xiaohua who was walking back as he already put aside his initial joy and was pondering in his heart, when would be an appropriate time for him go over to elder Yu's place to borrow the fist martial art manuals now that he had already learnt this sword stance movement?

Chapter 113: Overlook

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Overlook

It was a heavy downpour during that autumn day, and the weather had cooled down a lot.

The rainy days meant that there was not much work to do in the herb fields, He Tianshu would bring little second Nie and the rest to patrol a single round around the herb fields before returning back to their rooms.

Zhang Xiaohua was preoccupied with thoughts of his fist martial art, when He Tianshu returned, he immediately asked the latter where elder Yu's address was, and then carried an umbrella and walked out to the courtyard.

Elder Yu's accommodation was quite a distance from the courtyard where Zhang Xiaohua and the others stayed, it was much closer to the canteen, and Zhang Xiaohua could not help but think that it was in consideration for the former's age that his quarters were placed closer to the canteen, after all, the old man may have difficulties walking and miss out on his meals instead.

The rainy day made it convenient for Zhang Xiaohua to find elder Yu; elder Yu was idling in his room as the rain droplets continued to pour incessantly, and when Zhang Xiaohua knocked the door, he was invited in immediately.

Elder Yu's room was very simple; it was much tidier than Zhang Xiaohua's room but had a few more cabinets. When Zhang Xiaohua entered the room, elder Yu was sitting on his own bed and when he saw that the visitor was Zhang Xiaohua, he slowly got off the bed and looked at Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders that were wet from the rain before saying, "Zhang Xiaohua, it is raining so heavily now, what are you doing here instead of resting in your own room? Could you have made a breakthrough over the night?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, “Elder Yu, do you think I am a genius that is found once every fifty years, just learning those sixteen variations is enough to busy me for the rest of my life, not to mention the last three variations, just look at my fingers and you can tell.”

After finishing his sentence, he raised his right hand to elder Yu’s front and tried to curl his fingers in demonstration.

Zhang Xiaohua then continued, “Perhaps I will master the last three stances once my right fingers are able to move properly again.”

Elder Yu also chose to comfort Zhang Xiaohua at that moment, he said, “You do not have to be discouraged, the time will come for every person but one must first suffer before reaching his aspirations, perhaps this is a test that the heavens have set for you.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not disagree and said, “I have read this line before in some books, perhaps you are right.”

Then, he wrinkled his brow and said, “Elder Yu, do not change the topic, I came over today to find you to borrow some fist martial art manual like you agreed previously.”

Elder Yu slapped his forehead and said, “Look at this old man, I have almost forgotten about this matter. However, when you learn fist martial arts...”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Elder Yu, are you dissuading me again?”

Elder Yu remained silent.

Zhang Xiaohua said, “Everyone has something that they pursue while they are living, I came over to Pingyang city because I wanted to learn martial arts, so wouldn’t it be too hasty if I give up my goal just because of this injury? Furthermore, this injury is not too serious, doesn’t elder Yu also have only one right arm? And aren’t you still a martial art expert in Jianghu?”

Elder Yu smiled bitterly and said, “I know that you will mention this about me. Actually, you are still ignorant of the full story; putting aside the injury I suffered, I was only a second-rate character in Jianghu, and now that I am missing my left arm, I have fallen even more. Moreover, I got injured only after I reached my current achievements in martial arts, and even though it affected my martial art

skills, it is not as severe as in your case where you met with such a mishap even before learning any martial art completely. To be honest, whatever martial art you learn now will not be easy to master. Just like in the case of a person who is setting up a business, it will be extremely difficult you try to get him to start a successful enterprise from scratch, but if he had a successful business before it failed, then it is naturally easier for him to build up his business again, and perhaps it will become even more profitable after the setback.”

When Zhang Xiaohua heard elder Yu’s words, his face turned pale like the colour of the sky outside, and after a while later, he said, “But I am not willing to give up.”

Elder Yu sighed and said, “Looking at how crazy you are over martial arts, I already guessed that you would not be willing to give it up which is why I taught you a sword martial art instead. Hehe, you can do whatever you like then, the fist martial art manuals are on the bookshelves, I have not referred to them for quite a while.”

Zhang Xiaohua walked to the bookshelf that he was told of, and indeed, there were many books placed on it. After a careful inspection, he saw fist martial art manuals, sword martial art manuals, and the entire collection was very wide. However, when Zhang Xiaohua began to flip through the manuals, he realized that they were martial arts that he had already read about in Lotus escort, and were all widespread fist martial arts in Jianghu.

When elder Yu saw Zhang Xiaohua flipping through the books hastily, he felt strange and asked, “You can take whichever book you like as long as you remember to return it to me later.”

Zhang Xiaohua turned around and asked, “Elder Yu, do you have other fist martial art manuals, these all seem to be very common martial arts in Jianghu.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, even though these martial arts are commonly seen in Jianghu, an ordinary person will not have such easy access to them. You can pick one of them at random, and come to find me if you face any difficulties reading it. As for the fist martial arts within the sect, I naturally do not have any here so you don’t have to search for them any further. If I could teach them to you, I would have done so much earlier.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “Can you tell me what are some of the martial arts within your sect? Or just the fist martial arts?”

Elder Yu pondered for a while before shaking his head and said, “About this matters, you would have learnt of them earlier if you were fated to. If not, there is not much use in telling you and it will only cause you to be more frustrated.”

He pointed to the fist martial art manuals and said, “Do not look down on these fist martial arts, even though they may be common, but they are also the most practical especially after being refined and tested by so many people over the years. It will already be quite a significant achievement if you can become adept in them.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned red and he said, “About this, elder Yu, you are already aware of my aptitude. I kept on forgetting the stances, so I cannot learn these martial arts.”

Elder Yu blinked a few times and said, “In that case, you should read a fist martial art manual carefully so that you can commit it to memory.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “It is not like this, elder Yu, sigh, never mind, I will just borrow this instead.”

Realizing that he could not persuade the other party, Zhang Xiaohua did not try to explain any further so he randomly took a fist martial art manual without looking at its name and putting it into his breast before bidding farewell and rushing off excitedly.

Elder Yu looked at Zhang Xiaohua’s skinny frame as he disappeared into the rain, he shook his head and said in a low voice, “This child, sigh, he is still quite stubborn.”

After the recent activity in his room, elder Yu became too restless to continue sitting down so he walked to the front of his bed and beside the bookshelf where Zhang Xiaohua was referencing. Looking at the layer of dust on the bookshelf, elder Yu could not help but feel surprised, he could not remember when was the last time he referred to them. After sustaining his injury, he lost much of his determination and motivation unlike Zhang Xiaohua, so perhaps he had something to learn from the latter as well?

After pondering over his thoughts and just as he was about to turn around, he suddenly realized that a book was left under the bookshelf so he used a staff and carefully hooked it out; it was just another fist martial art manual which dropped during who knew when.

Elder Yu blew away the dust on its covers and casually slotted it back into the bookshelf.

Zhang Xiaohua supported the fist martial art manual in his chest while carrying an umbrella and walking carefully back to his room. His heart was feeling quite heavy, the reality was not as rosy as his anticipation as he had expected to find some never-seen before fist martial art manual in elder Yu's place to fill up the gaps of his fist martial art, but who would guess that he would return empty-handed. This result was something he had never expected at all.

However, as he reflected again, it was quite natural since the lotus escort library was a place for people to learn martial arts so its collection was vast, whereas elder Yu's collection was built simply from his own interest so it was unlikely that he would find something from the latter's collection that the escort station did not have. Actually, it would have been strange instead if he had managed to find something unique in elder Yu's collection instead.

He was too presumptuous before.

Now that the situation had come to this, Zhang Xiaohua was feeling vexed again, where else could he find other fist martial arts that he had not learnt before?

Must he go over to Piaomiao sect?

No, that was too unrealistic.

Not long later, Zhang Xiaohua reached his own courtyard.

When he passed through the courtyard entrance, he realized that the door in his room was opened.

Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of puzzlement, did he forget to close the door before leaving? Nope, he recalled shutting the door tight before he left.

As he walked closer to the room, he heard familiar voices coming out from the

room, and even though the pitter-patter of the rain made it hard to discern the voices, Zhang Xiaohua increased his pace to complete the last steps before reaching the door and shouted, “Second brother, is that you?”

Indeed, Zhang Xiaohu’s voice echoed from inside the room, “Xiaohua, you’re back?”

When Zhang Xiaohua entered the room, he could see clearly that apart from Zhang Xiaohua, He Tianshu and Li Jinfeng were currently in his room as well.

Zhang Xiaohu walked to the door, took Zhang Xiaohua’s umbrella and helped him closed it just like how he would carefully attend to the boy when he was in the escort station.

He Tianshu was standing in the room and when he saw Zhang Xiaohua returned, he said to Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng, “Zhang Xiaohua is back now so I won’t accompany you any longer. You two are still welcomed to come and visit again anytime.”

Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng quickly replied, “Many thanks to squad leader He, let’s get to know each other better when there’s an opportunity in the future.”

He Tianshu nodded at Zhang Xiaohua before saying, “Be a good host to your elder brother and friend.”

He then left after finishing his sentence.

Zhang Xiaohua watched as He Tianshu left before turning around excitedly and asking, “Second brother, why did you visit me all of a sudden today? Oh right, gentleman Li as well, are you free too?”

Li Jinfeng walked up to the front, smiled and said, “You little rascal ran away so soon. During the previous time, we agreed to let me send you up the mountain villa, but you and your second brother disappeared not long after our agreement, and I had to ask around before learning that you have returned and your second brother had gone out on a job. Now that I have some free time and am feeling bored in the library, I decided to come over and visit you but was unsure on how to, so I pulled your second brother along with me.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Second brother, when did you come back? Was your job successful?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled gleefully and replied, “I came back a few days ago, didn’t I say that I was only going somewhere nearby, it was all within Piaomiao sect’s sphere of influence and we only went out to gain some experience, so it was really nothing significant at all.”

Zhang Xiaohu turned his gaze towards Zhang Xiaohua’s right hand and said, “I have been meaning to come and visit you to check on your recovery, and since there was nothing in the station due to the rain, gentleman Li came over while I was idling in my room so we came over to visit you, haha.”

Zhang Xiaohua knew that his second brother and Li Jinfeng was concerned over him so he extended his right arm and punched the air a few times with force, saying, “Look, I am already fine, squad leader He said that I may fully recover as long as I practice regularly.”

Zhang Xiaohu was overjoyed and he said, “That will be for the best, so slowly practice more.”

Li Jinfeng was also very happy and said, “That’s great, I can see you do some martial arts soon. Oh right, I saw the books on your bed and tables, so I guess that you have continued to read quite often, not bad, you can be proficient in both books and martial arts.”

Zhang Xiaohua was feeling slightly embarrassed and he said, “I am not as awesome as how gentleman Li described, I just happened to read some random books when I get bored.”

Following which, Zhang Xiaohua raised some questions he encountered while reading the books and discussed them with Li Jinfeng; the number of questions were not few but Li Jinfeng answered them patiently one by one. At the end, Li Jinfeng gave Zhang Xiaohua an impressed look as he said, “Zhang Xiaohua, you have been not bad at all, these questions cannot be thought of if you do not understand the text in-depth, I am pretty awed right now.”

Upon hearing Li Jinfeng’s praise for his younger brother, Zhang Xiaohu felt extremely happy and after the two finished their discussion, he cut into their conversation and asked, “Zhang Xiaohua, are you still practicing martial arts?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly and said, “Yes, but there was not much improvement at all.”

Zhang Xiaohu misunderstood the situation, he assumed that Zhang Xiaohua was still forgetting the stances after being taught so he smiled and said, "It is alright, just train slowly and you will be able to learn it completely one day."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "I know, second brother, I have not given up and am still working hard. Oh right, how is your progress with the inner energy cultivation method?"

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua's expectant gaze, Zhang Xiaohu also smiled bitterly and said, "Sigh, there is nothing for you to be envious of. This inner energy cultivation method is not that mysterious, you will find that out once you begin training it as well. I have managed to feel something, but had been out on my job for the escort station so did not have any time to practice, and even when I was free, I would practice that sixth fist stance again. However, I still listened to your words and would occasionally train in that south branch fist, after all, stones from another mountain can attack jade so it would be good to gain some experience."

Zhang Xiaohua was very happy when he heard his second brother's words, he was feeling happy for the latter's progress when suddenly, he felt as though he caught on to something but was unable to figure out what it was. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua used his left hand to grab onto Zhang Xiaohu's wrist and asked urgently, "Second brother, what did you say just now? Can you repeat it again?"

Zhang Xiaohu's mouth was slightly twisted and he yelped, "ah, ah" in pain before saying, "Xiaohua, let go quickly, why must you use so much strength?"

Zhang Xiaohua realized that he was too rash and he quickly loosened his grip before saying sheepishly, "Sorry, second brother, it was an accident. What you said earlier made me think of something, do you mind repeating what you said earlier?"

Zhang Xiaohu was confused but he still said, "So I listened to your advice and trained in the south branch fist to compare it to my previous fist stance."

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a moment before shaking his head and said, "Not that, what else was there?"

Zhang Xiaohu wrinkled his brow and said, "That inner energy cultivation method is not as mysterious as you thought, I managed to feel something now

but it is still too early to tell.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered again before shaking his head.

Zhang Xiaohu was helpless and he said, “I only said those things, as well as not being able to practice the inner energy cultivation method when I was out on the job for the escort station, so apart from the sixth fist stance and south branch fist, I am still not familiar with other martial arts.”

Upon hearing the three words “sixth fist stance”, Zhang Xiaohua felt a flash of light running across his head, that was right, it was precisely this “sixth fist stance”. No wonder he seemed to have recalled something important when he heard his second brother earlier sentences; despite reading over a hundred fist martial art manuals, he had yet to learn this sixth fist stance, sigh, was this what it meant by not seeing what was close to oneself?

Actually, the events that happened were quite coincidental, when He Tianshu was teaching Zhang Xiaohua fist martial arts, he heard the boy mentioned seeing someone else performing the sixth fist stance but not being able to pick up the stances himself. This sixth fist stance was well-known for being complex and hard to learn, so when He Tianshu thought of Zhang Xiaohua’s frighteningly poor memory, he decided to only teach the boy the said martial art over his dead body.

As for the period when Zhang Xiaohua was in the escort station, the library in the escort station had a copy of the sixth fist stance, but because Zhang Xiaohu was famous for practicing only that fist martial art, many people would go to the library to borrow the fist martial art manual in hopes of picking up some clue, so Zhang Xiaohua never had the opportunity to read the fist martial art manual.

And whenever Zhang Xiaohu was practicing the sixth fist stance in his room, Zhang Xiaohua would be preoccupied with the other fist martial art manuals so he naturally did not think of learning the sixth fist stance from his second brother. In fact, the book that elder Yu picked up from under the bookshelf was perhaps the sixth fist stance fist martial art manual as well.

In short, due to a series of coincidences, Zhang Xiaohua only managed to realize at the last moment that he had yet to learn a set of very familiar fist martial art, which was also the first martial art he had ever seen, the sixth fist

stance!

Sigh, it was like the heavens were playing a joke on him.

Nevertheless, Zhang Xiaohua's joy was not lessened when he realized that he had another fist martial art to learn, the sixth fist stance might be able to complete his fist martial art, and it might not, but at least, it gave Zhang Xiaohua some hope in getting closer to his goal.

As for the person to teach him the martial art, his own second brother was the perfect candidate to do so. Zhang Xiaohua did not hesitate and immediately asked Zhang Xiaohu to demonstrate the entire sequence for him to learn.

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head like a recently shaven monk from his confusion, he said a few more words. This little brother of his actually wanted him to teach the former the sixth fist stance, and even though he did not mind doing so, when he looked at Li Jinfeng who was standing by the side and then at the small cramped room, Zhang Xiaohu had some reservations doing so right then.

Li Jinfeng saw through Zhang Xiaohu's concern so he quickly said, "Brother Zhang does not have to mind me, I am well aware of Xiaohua's personality, and since he is my student, I am more than happy to see him improve himself."

Zhang Xiaohua realized his inappropriate actions and said, "Sorry, gentleman Li, I will continue our discussion after learning this fist martial art."

Zhang Xiaohu said, "Xiaohua, isn't this room too small? I don't think I will be able to display it to its fullest, my room in the escort station is much larger than this which was why I could practice in my own room."

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his chin and said, "It is alright, second brother, you can just perform it slowly and teach me roughly. Anyway, I will probably forget most of the stances."

Li Jinfeng was shocked when he heard Zhang Xiaohua's reply, what was the matter right now, the latter wanted his brother to teach him martial arts that he will forget anyway, so what was the point of teaching in the first place?

Zhang Xiaohu understood his younger brother's intention so he pondered for a while before replying, "Alright, since it is like this, I shall teach it to you right

now.”

Chapter 114: Filling the gaps

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Filling the gaps

Zhang Xiaohu finally experienced at first-hand of how perverted his little brother's memory was.

Zhang Xiaohu slowly performed the sixth fist stance for three cycles but whenever he asked Zhang Xiaohua, the latter would say that he could not recall anything, Zhang Xiaohu helplessly went on to the fourth cycle.

Just as he was about to enter the opening stance, Zhang Xiaohua stopped him and said, "Second brother, don't start yet. Let me try it as well while you watch."

Hence, under Zhang Xiaohu's directions, Zhang Xiaohua managed to perform something of semblance to the six fist stance from its beginning to end. Zhang Xiaohua did not feel much, but Zhang Xiaohu was perspiring profusely when they were done as though it was ten times more tiring than performing the stance himself.

Li Jinfeng who was standing at a side was in confusion, he was well aware of Zhang Xiaohua's aptitude towards studying, and it was precisely his perverted memory that allowed the latter to memorize the "Word explanation" within such a short period, so why did he turn out like this when it came to learning martial arts?

It was really confusing.

The thing that made Li Jinfeng spit blood from his mouth was when Zhang Xiaohu was asking Zhang Xiaohua during his rest if he managed to pick it up? Or did he need his brother to demonstrate it a second time? Zhang Xiaohu was asking in a voice full of concern.

However, Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and said, "It is alright, second brother, I only need to perform the entire stance once."

Li Jinfeng also asked in concern, "Xiaohua, it is better to practice a few more times. Your second brother cannot come so frequently, so if you still want to learn this martial art after he leaves, you might no longer be able to."

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows and said, "Better no, I have already learnt all I can."

Zhang Xiaohu assumed that his brother was afraid of troubling himself so he smiled and said, "Xiaohua, it is fine, second brother is not tired. Come, I will perform it one more time for you."

After finishing his sentence, he slowly performed the stance over again while explaining the details which he personally picked up, such as at what time or at in what direction, et cetera. Zhang Xiaohua had no choice but to nod his head as he thought secretly, "Second brother had indeed practiced this to a high level."

However, his expression did not show that he understood, and Li Jinfeng who was watching all these shook his head continuously from his side.

After Zhang Xiaohu finished his demonstration and kept back his stance, he stood at a side and said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, why don't you try it again and show it to me so I can give you some pointers again."

Zhang Xiaohua immediately waved both hands profusely and said, "It is really alright, second brother. You also know that I have already learnt it, and I could remember all that you said earlier."

Zhang Xiaohu was even more unconvinced and he said, "Hurry and perform it, let me see if you actually learnt it or not."

Even up to that moment, Zhang Xiaohu was still not fully convinced about what Zhang Xiaohua had told him before.

Whatever about not being able to learn a fist martial art to completion, perhaps his instructor did not try his utmost best, but now that he was willing to explain in detail and given what Li Jinfeng said about Zhang Xiaohua's aptitude, how would Zhang Xiaohua still not be able to learn properly?

Unfortunately, the truth struck deeply into his confidence.

Unable to win over Zhang Xiaohu in the war of words, Zhang Xiaohua had no choice but to adopt the opening stance and demonstrate the sixth fist stance slowly. The thing which made the two men's eyes popped out was, Zhang Xiaohua forgot everything else after the sixth stance and under Zhang Xiaohu's reminder, he continued to perform another ten stances where he stopped again, and again with Zhang Xiaohu's reminder for five to six more times throughout the performance, Zhang Xiaohua managed to display the fist martial art in its entirety.

Looking at Zhang Xiaohua's innocent expression, Zhang Xiaohu asked in a helpless voice, "Xiaohua, is this normally what happens when you learn martial arts?"

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's confident nod, Zhang Xiaohu patted his shoulders and said, "It has been hard on you, Xiaohua."

Li Jinfeng bent over and asked, "Xiaohua, I still feel that it is strange, this sequences of movements are not so complex and even though I have not learnt martial arts before, just based on my memory of the two of you practicing it, I can already perform quite a few of the stances."

After finishing his sentence, the scholar Li Jinfeng rolled up his long sleeves and began to demonstrate ten over stances.

He then said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Look, I am able to learn a dozen over stances even with my aptitude, so how can you only remember six stances? This is really strange."

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and said, "Elder brother Li, I am not sure to be honest. My previous attempts in learning martial arts has always been like this, and I would forget a lot from each fist martial art as well."

Li Jinfeng said as if he saw the strangest thing in the world, "This is really inconceivable, you are even able to memorize the "Words explanation" so how come you can't even remember this?"

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, "Elder brother Li, what is so strange about that? The "Words explanation" is only a textbook for little children, whereas

learning martial arts is something that is very difficult for the mind, so you cannot just compare them like this.”

Li Jinfeng smiled bitterly but did not say anything in response.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohu continued to say, “What about the manuals in the escort station? They were all words as well so did you remember them?”

Zhang Xiaohu said, “I can remember that clearly.”

Zhang Xiaohu slapped his forehead and said, “This cannot do, I will borrow the sixth fist stance martial art manual and bring it over to you tomorrow.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “It is alright, second brother, these fist martial arts that I memorized over the previous few months have all been forgotten after I practiced them.”

“Ah.....” Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng gaped.

Zhang Xiaohua continued, “No matter if I learn it from a manual or from someone else, as long as I practiced it, I would forget up to half of everything, but those that I did not forget will forever be retained in my memory. As for how many I can remember, it will be up to the next day when I will find out.”

“Ho.....” Li Jinfeng bellowed as he looked at Zhang Xiaohu with a respectful gaze, he said in a stammering tone, “Could this be, is this the legendary “only skim in the surface”!?”

Only further listening to Zhang Xiaohua’s explanation and thinking back to the situation with Zhang Xiaohua did Zhang Xiaohu believe his younger brother’s words fully, but he could only flap his hands around helplessly. Like what his younger brother said, everyone had their own path which was suitable for themselves, and other people are not able to help much on their progress.

Lunch was with He Tianshu and the others in the canteen, Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng were full of praises as they ate the food. However, while they were eating, Li Jinfeng would frequently turn his gaze towards Zhang Xiaohua causing the latter to be puzzled, the scholar was usually so polite so what had caused him to lose his bearings today?

However, Li Jinfeng quickly told Zhang Xiaohua even before he could figure it

out by himself.

On the way back to his room, Li Jinfeng sneakily pulled Zhang Xiaohua to aside and whispered, “Xiaohua, why did we not see lady Qiu Tong during lunch just now?”

It then dawned on Zhang Xiaohua that this scholar did not come up the mountain villa just for himself.

He smiled gleefully and said, “She is right at that corner, didn’t you notice her?”

Li Jinfeng immediately turned his head around and looked back at the canteen from afar, he said in a puzzled tone, “Why did I not see her? Strange, I did search the entire canteen just now.”

He suddenly seemed to have figured out something and said, “There were only three tables in the canteen, what corner will there be. Xiaohua, you are joking with me right?”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed and said, “It seems that elder brother Li is still head over heels, haha. Elder sister Qiu Tong probably eats together with the villa master at a different time and perhaps at another place. I am not sure of the details, but as far as I know, I have never seen elder sister Qiu Tong before while eating in this canteen.”

Seeing the lost expression on Li Jinfeng’s face, Zhang Xiaohua said, “However, I remembered ever encountering elder sister Qiu Tong on this path while returning back to my room after my meal.”

Upon hearing his words, Li Jinfeng’s eyes immediately brightened and he would turn his head around after taking a step in hopes of spotting the person he was looking for, but unfortunately, he did not notice her figure by the time he reached the little courtyard.

Even as he sat on the chair within the room, Li Jinfeng was thinking of Qiu Tong and pondering if he should ask Zhang Xiaohua to help him find her. However, he also knew that Zhang Xiaohua had a lowly status in the mountain villa who was not allowed to roam under the entire villa so how would be able to find her? Furthermore, Zhang Xiaohua said that he had not seen Qiu Tong for quite a long

while himself so he dampened his desire. Nevertheless, his eyes would still wander to gaze out of the window as though he was expecting to see something.

Unfortunately, the heavens do not move according to one person's will and it rained heavily the entire afternoon. While they were people who walked past the room, none of them had a female figure.

Upon seeing that the day had gotten late, Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng reluctantly got up; Zhang Xiaohu was naturally unwilling to part with his younger brother as he pulled the latter's hand and reminded him this and whatnot, but what was the reason for Li Jinfeng's reluctance?

The security in Huanxi mountain villa were very strict, Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng had to carry waist tokens and were escorted over by the guards when they went over to Zhang Xiaohua's place, so they naturally had to be escorted back when they left. The three men walked out of the room where it was still drizzling lightly, while Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng bid He Tianshu their farewells when they passed by the latter's room. Zhang Xiaohu burdened He Tianshu to look after his younger brother for the following days ahead and He Tianshu coolly agreed, and after exchanging some pleasantries, the three then left the courtyard.

There was some distance from the courtyard to the back door, and the path was lined with azure stones so it was not muddy. The party of three chatted as they walked, and Li Jinfeng could not help but ask as he saw the fields they passed by, "Xiaohua, what fields are these? Some are for growing crops, I can recognize those but what about the rest? They seemed to be grass, could it be some type of vegetable?"

Zhang Xiaohu pondered and decided after a while that it was better to not tell, so he stopped the latter from asking, "Elder brother Li, our mountain villa has rules and many things cannot be shared with outsiders so you should not inquire about them."

However, on a second thought, he said, "If you have any books on growing herbs at your side, can you lend me some to read?"

When Li Jinfeng heard his reply, the corners of his mouth turned upwards.

As they travelled the remaining distance, the sky turned dark and gloomy, and

the earlier drizzle finally stopped. Frog and insect sounds could be heard from the drain on the side of the road, probably to welcome the clean air after the rain.

The surrounding scenery immediately led to two brothers to reminisce about Guo village, and Zhang Xiaohu said, "Xiaohua, do you miss home after coming out here for so long?"

Zhang Xiaohua answered obviously, "I do, of course I do. However, I have not accomplished anything worth mentioning yet, so I don't want to say anything unnecessary to cause them to worry."

Zhang Xiaohu sighed and said, "That's right, I also feel this way. However, we should at least let them know that we are safe. If not, father and mother will be worrying endlessly at home."

Li Jinfeng wrinkled his brow and said, "Brother Zhang can just find someone he knows to carry a message back to your home, wouldn't that be fine?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly and said, "We two brothers came here by ourselves, we have no friends or relatives in Pingyang city so how can we find someone to send a message back?"

Li Jinfeng smiled and said, "Have brother Zhang forgotten that you still have this friend here who is from the same village?"

Zhang Xiaohu replied, "I know that gentleman Li is from Lu town, but haven't you been busy studying in the school? I remembered that gentleman is alone in his own world, so where would you find the time to help us send a message back?"

Li Jinfeng nodded and said, "You are right, but our school has vacation during autumn-winter, and even though it is not long, there is still sufficient time to go back home for a while. During this autumn, I was studying in school while teaching Zhang Xiaohua to read so I did not go back to Lu town, but I will be able to pass a message back to your families after a short period later."

Zhang Xiaohua and Zhang Xiaohu immediately said in unison, "Really, gentleman Li, that would be great."

Li Jinfeng waved his hands and said, "You don't have to be so courteous to me,

we are all fellows from the same place so we should help each other whenever we can. I am only doing something out of convenience, why bother to thank me so much?”

After chatting for a while, the party reached the back door and the guard who was stationed there confirmed their waist tokens while getting Zhang Xiaohua to sign in the record book before letting Zhang Xiaohu and Li Jinfeng leave.

When the three stood outside the door, Zhang Xiaohua looked at his younger brother again while the latter grabbed on to his sleeves tightly with no intention of letting him go. Even though the two were not living too far apart from each other, the next time they would meet again could be more than a month so it was unavoidable that both were unwilling to part. However, Li Jinfeng was less emotional and he said, “You two brothers will still be living in Pingyang city together. If Zhang Xiaohu is too busy practicing his martial arts to come, then I will go over more often to visit you to make up for his absence.”

Zhang Xiaohua then let go of his grip and said, “Elder brother Li, you are free to come by yourself if my second brother is too busy to visit. When I chance upon elder sister Qiu Tong again, I shall let her know that you would like to see her, alright?”

Upon hearing his words, Li Jinfeng smiled gleefully and said, “These are words that I love to hear and I would come more often to hear them. However, there is no need to emphasize on how much I miss her, just dropping a small hint would be fine.”

Zhang Xiaohua was confused, he asked, “Ah? Why so?”

Li Jinfeng explained, “You won’t be able to understand this since you are young. Wait till you get older before you will understand it yourself, so just listen to my instructions for now.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head in understanding.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohu would turn around after every three steps as he followed Li Jinfeng and left Huanxi mountain villa.

The weather was clear when the next day came so Zhang Xiaohua ran over to his usual spot under the tree early in the morning.

His thoughts were full of anticipation on the results of Zhang Xiaohu's guidance, he did not move his hands and legs immediately but slowly tried to recall the sequence to perform the sixth fist stance. As he expected, the ten over stances of the sixth fist stance were forgotten and filtered down until seven stances were left.

Zhang Xiaohua performed these seven stances until he was certain that they were carved into his memory before stopping and changing into the horse stance. His mind began the familiar action of trying to link the stances together, and this puzzle was like building blocks, it got easier as he reached closer to the end as the hundred and one stances only had seven areas where they did not fit together, so each stance only needed to try and link to these areas. Indeed, the success rate was high and the fist stance managed to link perfectly to a sequence on its fourth attempt, and Zhang Xiaohua had integrated it perfectly with the rest of the stances. The next few stances were even easier and when there was only one stance and one broken link left, Zhang Xiaohua's excitement grew even more turbulent, he was slightly worried that the pieces would not link together.

This time, the heavens were kind to Zhang Xiaohua and he was not disappointed in the end, the stance fitted perfectly into the fist martial art. Right at that moment, the incomplete fist martial art was presently completed and it flowed to the front of his mind like a waterfall, while a small figure of Zhang Xiaohua was performing the nameless fist martial art from beginning to end.

After watching the little figure practiced the martial art for a few cycles, Zhang Xiaohua also felt motivated and he followed his thoughts and walked into the forest to perform the fist martial art.

There were a total of a hundred and eight stances in this fist martial art, and even though it was Zhang Xiaohua's first time practicing this martial art, he had already done these stances many times in the past so apart from the recently added seven stances, all the other stances had gone through countless hours of practice. Now that Zhang Xiaohua had aggregated them together, it felt extremely smooth as he performed the martial art from beginning to end.

After Zhang Xiaohua finished his first cycle, he still could not get over his excitement and went on for another three cycles before keeping back his stance.

The Zhang Xiaohua at that moment was feeling incomparably light and comfortable, his mood had never been better before as though he was a dragon that just got released from its gold lock. The burden that had been pressing on his heart was finally thrown aside, and he was able to practice a complete set of fist martial arts like the other ordinary person.

A brilliant path was currently being laid out in front of Zhang Xiaohua.

For the rest of the day, Zhang Xiaohua would ponder about this hundred and eight stance fist martial art while he was working in the fields, he studied every stance as closely as possible. He remembered that his second brother ever said that every fist martial art had its defensive and offensive stance in order to be perfect, so how was this fist martial art which he had “forgotten” hundreds of other fist martial arts to learn?

After Zhang Xiaohua carefully examined the martial art, he realized that there were only thirty-six stances that were defensive, the other seventy-two were all offensive manoeuvres. Zhang Xiaohua could not help but feel surprised, these seventy-two stances were merciless to the ground, merciless indeed. Staunch and ferocity was the essence of its offence, but heaven and earth was harmonious so the thirty-six defensive stances were sturdy like the earth, sturdy indeed. Zhang Xiaohua thought back to several sentences from the books he read, suspicion grew in his heart and he wanted to know if his line of thoughts were correct.

During the night, the canopy of the forest made the whole place looked as dark as ink, and there was no moon that night despite the numerous stars.

Zhang Xiaohua practiced his fist martial art alone in a space in the forest, his body felt comfortable unlike ever before and he continued his practice with the sixteen variations of the sword martial art before sitting down to rest. The rain from the previous day made the ground slightly muddy and the sun did not manage to dry the ground completely yet.

Zhang Xiaohua pulled out a stalk of grass and gripped it in his mouth, his body was leaning on a tree as he thought of this question, “All those common fist martial arts have their own names, such as Rohan fist, south branch fist, and Erlang fist, so what name should he give to his martial art? Xiaohua fist? That’s

not nice, it sounds too weak, patchwork fist? That sounds worse, sigh, what should I do?”

Zhang Xiaohua was feeling slightly frustrated as he placed his hands at the back of his head and laid on the slightly wet grass,

His eyes looked up at the comforting night sky and the uncountable stars that were far in the distance, Zhang Xiaohua felt as though he had not seen such stars in a long time. The last time he gazed at the stars, it was when his grandmother was still around and he was accompanying the old woman as they chatted in the courtyard within Guo village.

When he thought of his grandmother, Zhang Xiaohua felt even more hurt.

Was his grandmother still doing well up in the heavens?

Which star was home to his grandmother now?

Chapter 115: Dipper

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Dipper

Looking at the bright stars that were sparkling in the night sky, Zhang Xiaohua submerged himself in his thoughts, and at one point of time, he felt that the lights seemed familiar although he could not recall where he had seen them before.

Zhang Xiaohua felt a sort of bitter happiness, this period of time had really been strange to him. Some things would seem familiar to him but he would not recall them if he tried, but then, what kind of relationship would the faraway stars had with him in order for him to feel that way?

As he continued to stargaze, Zhang Xiaohua suddenly turned his attention to the hook-like big dipper, He recalled ever reading “Elm trees shed in February, the hook turns to the east, wheat sprout in August, the base points to the west”, “the moon disappears and grows full but the dipper stays in the sky” and other descriptions of the big dipper. Since the big dipper has thirty-six stars, didn’t it have many similarities with the thirty-six defensive stances in his self-created martial arts?

Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of joy washed over him, his fist martial art now had a name from that moment forth: dipper fist.

As for the seventy offensive strikes that coincided with evilness, he threw it to the back of his head and no longer thought about it. That is because the name dipper fist sounded so bright, anyone who heard of it would think that it was some profound martial art, and who would be able to guess where it came from anyway? If Zhang Xiaohua did not explain its origins, no one else would be able to guess that it was an amalgamation of the various common fist martial arts

even if they squeezed out their brain juices, they would probably assume that Zhang Xiaohua had long forgotten all these previous fist martial arts that he learnt before.

After finding a name for his fist martial art, Zhang Xiaohua jumped off from the ground and picked up his vigour to continue and practice this dipper fist.

Zhang Xiaohua lost track of the number of times he practiced but just as he decided to practice the fist martial art for the last time, a strange event suddenly occurred.

When Zhang Xiaohua was standing in a position and getting ready to continue the stance from the beginning, he suddenly felt an extremely faint but chilly sensation from his toes spreading slowly up from his feet to his legs. Zhang Xiaohua was frightened into stopping his practice as he tried to examine the feeling, but the chilly sensation disappeared almost immediately. Zhang Xiaohua felt strange, did he mistake the sensation?

Hence, he walked over to a drier ground and re-entered the opening position of his martial art, indeed, the moment he began to practice his martial art, the chilly sensation would reappear and spread from his toes all the way to his feet and then upwards to his legs.

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and decided to retract his stance, this mysterious occurrence which ridiculously appeared from nowhere made him wary, what should he do if his training led him astray?

Sigh, learning by oneself is indeed difficult, but Zhang Xiaohua did not think that he had not learned any inner energy cultivation method before so how would he be led astray? Perhaps he was affected after hearing many people around him said that phrase.

However, Zhang Xiaohua still could not think of a reason for the occurrence despite pondering over it for a long while, this fist martial art was finally completed after much difficulties but he could not train in it, this matter was such a cause for headache, why did such a problem surface when he had not trained for even half a day?

Why not switch to sword martial arts? When Zhang Xiaohua thought of sword martial arts, he was reminded of the warm flow in his left hand and his heart

stirred; perhaps this chilly sensation was a similar kind of thing as the warm flow?

When he thought up to here, Zhang Xiaohua gained some understanding of the situation and his fear dissipated away. He made his mind and decided to investigate the matter, just what kind of situation could he push himself into!

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua's mood recovered and he returned to the opening stance and practiced again from the beginning. Zhang Xiaohua could feel the chilly sensation changing as he performed each stance in the sequence, it appeared in toes of his left feet and went up his leg before covering his lower body and heading towards his head area. By then, Zhang Xiaohua was already forty to fifty percent into the fist martial art when it flowed back down to his lower body, and by the hundred and eighth stance, it vanished from his right toes.

After finishing the stance, Zhang Xiaohua did not feel any unusual change in his body as though there had never been any chilly sensation at all. When he thought of the chilly sensation flowing around his body, it was really nothing special in the end, and it flowed quite smoothly apart from the time it passed by his right hand where it became slightly sluggish. Zhang Xiaohua could not understand the reason, but he could also not ask anybody about his queries, after all, how do you expect him to walk up to He Tianshu and ask, "Squad leader He, why was there a chilly sensation in my toes while I was practicing my fist martial art?"

Perhaps He Tianshu would ask the boy back, "Did your shoes and socks get wet from the ground?"

Perhaps, this was inner energy? Zhang Xiaohua felt a glimmer of hope.

If it was inner energy, then that would be awesome. If his own fist martial art was able to let him cultivate inner energy, then even the name dipper fist was not good enough for such an awesome martial art, so what should he changed its name into?

Zhang Xiaohua was even in a knot because of this.

Suddenly, his eyes brightened, that's right, let's call it dipper heavenly fist.

Such a cool name, Zhang Xiaohua felt incredibly proud of himself.

As for whether the chilly sensation was inner energy, Zhang Xiaohua planned to ask his second brother the next time he met the latter on how he cultivated his inner energy in detail. After making his mind up, Zhang Xiaohua prepared to head back as the night was getting late and he still had work to do the next day.

However, the chilly sensation caused Zhang Xiaohua to enter his beginning stance again to perform the martial art for the very last time.

Unfortunately, as Zhang Xiaohua began his practice, the chilly sensation actually disappeared! By the time Zhang Xiaohua finished performing all hundred and eight stances, the chilly sensation had not appeared even once.

Zhang Xiaohua was like wet vegetables, he remained silent and carried his lantern as he walked back to his room. Luckily, he had not mentioned this to He Tianshu, if this feeling would come and go so unpredictably, how would he be able to explain it to the latter?

Zhang Xiaohua was pondering non-stop about this issue during his trip back, why did the feeling come and go?

Up until the night turned late and he fell asleep, Zhang Xiaohua did not find his answer.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua went over to the empty space in the forest very early in the morning and he began his practice by using his left hand to practice sword martial art. The warm flow would appear every single time now that Zhang Xiaohua was extremely familiar with the movement, he also felt the warm flow would be beneficial to him without any negative effects. Following which, he practiced the sword martial art with his right hand for a while, and after so many days of practice, Zhang Xiaohua imagined that his right hands had become nimbler than before. However, it was only a feeling and something he could not ascertain himself.

After he was done with the sword martial art practice, Zhang Xiaohua began to practice the dipper heavenly fist of his.

After practicing for a while, the chilly sensation did not resurface at all causing Zhang Xiaohua to feel disappointed, he knew that it was in not his imagination but that the sensation occurred but he was unable to reproduce the feeling, and had no idea on what to do in order for it to reappear.

As he looked at the changing colour of the sky, he guessed that the azure robed little hat servants were probably still fast asleep while He Tianshu and the rest should have just began their own martial arts practice. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua continued to practice the fist martial art, he only knew this martial art apart from the sword martial art, but his fingers would turn sore if he practiced the sword martial art for long, so he had no other choice but to train in it.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was immersed in his training, the feeling reappeared again. However, it was not the chilly sensation and was slightly warm instead. Zhang Xiaohua immediately became elated again, he did each and every stance carefully to observe the sensation in case it did anything unusual to his body. The sensation was “a repeat of yesterday” as there did not seem to be any effect caused by the warm flow, and it did not re-occur when Zhang Xiaohua proceeded to do another cycle after finishing one set of the sequence.

At that moment, it dawned on Zhang Xiaohua that no matter the feeling was a warm flow or chilly sensation, it was probably related to the number of times he performed the martial art. After he finished a required number of sets, the feeling would appear again and the countdown would reset until the next cycle.

Zhang Xiaohua thought back carefully, he remembered that he had practiced the martial art for ten cycles since morning, so the feeling would appear every ninth cycle!

After he had discovered so, Zhang Xiaohua could also guess that this dipper heavenly fist would reach its highest effectiveness on the ninth repetition, but whenever he practiced the martial art in the morning or evening, the time it took to complete the hundred and eight stances was not short so he was only able to practice one set of nine cycles each time, and had no time to do a second set.

Of course, all these were only Zhang Xiaohua’s conjecture.

For the next few days, Zhang Xiaohua would hide in the forest to practice his dipper heavenly fist, and in order to make most of his time, Zhang Xiaohua would go to the forest during his lunch break. Furthermore, after several experiments, Zhang Xiaohua also discovered that when he practiced the dipper heavenly fist in the morning, the feeling was neither warm nor cold, and when it was the afternoon, the feeling would be slightly hot, and the feeling would turn chilly as

he practiced in the night. The feeling was different during the three periods of the day, and Zhang Xiaohua felt strange about it.

At the beginning, Zhang Xiaohua would still have some caution towards it, after all, it appeared out of nowhere so how could he tell if it was something good or bad? However, after the passing of several days, there was nothing uncomfortable with his body despite the numerous training so Zhang Xiaohua naturally calmed down.

Ever since he taught Zhang Xiaohua the sword martial art, elder Yu would go over to visit the latter once in a while but only from afar where he would not be spotted. However, after confirming that the boy was extremely diligent in his practice, he no longer went over. During the recent few days, elder Yu noticed that Zhang Xiaohua would disappear in the afternoon as well, and his heart could not help but ache for the boy. Actually, elder Yu was quite nonchalant of the boy in the beginning, he only felt that the boy was steadfast and hardworking, and also had a strong passion for martial arts but had extremely poor aptitude towards it so he did not do anything about him. When Zhang Xiaohua's right hand got injured and the bones in the hand shattered such that the boy effectively became crippled in one hand, he still insisted on training even without any guidance and mastery of any complete martial art. Thus, it made elder Yu thought back to his dismembered left arm and he empathized with Zhang Xiaohua, so he imparted a nameless sword martial art to the boy and even though the latter did not learn it completely, elder Yu still developed a liking towards this headstrong 'stupid' child.

Upon seeing that Zhang Xiaohua was still training his martial arts in the afternoon, he naturally knew that Zhang Xiaohua was trying to improve his mastery of either the sword or fist martial art. However, while elder Yu could understand the boy's desire to grow stronger, he was afraid that the additional training would be counterproductive and hurt his body instead. Thus, while Zhang Xiaohua was practicing the sword martial art during one afternoon, elder Yu secretly went over to observe the boy.

When elder Yu went over, Zhang Xiaohua was coincidentally using his right hand and when the latter saw the unexpected visitor, he grew alarmed which turned into hoi. Zhang Xiaohua did not keep back his sword stance and used his

tree branch to thrust towards elder Yu. Upon seeing the oncoming tree branch, elder Yu was also surprised and he immediately turned his body to avoid the strike. However, Zhang Xiaohua did not pause his attack and he took another step towards the elder and switched to a different sword variation to attack the elder. This sword stance was taught by elder Yu personally so the elder was naturally very familiar with the inner energy technique that complemented the martial art. When he saw Zhang Xiaohua's attack, elder Yu felt happy and he moved his body according to the strikes without counterattacking. After Zhang Xiaohua finished demonstrating all sixteen sword variations, the tree branch did not touch anywhere on his body.

Zhang Xiaohua kept back his stance and the tree branch, and elder Yu stopped moving as well. He smiled gleefully and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, you have learnt quite well, these dozen over variations are sharp and quick, even I would have succumbed to your attacks if I was not familiar with the movements."

He continued, "Your right hand had turned much more nimble during this period, and the sword stance variations have become more smooth and forthcoming. However, the force in your attacks are still far from sufficient and I guess that it is due to your fingers not up to par yet."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled back and said, "That's right, elder Yu. After this period of time, my fingers have been rehabilitated by the sword stance requirements and became more nimble. While they would get sore after two to three cycles in the past, it has gotten much better now."

Elder Yu said, "But this is still nothing to be proud of, did you still not managed to learn the last three variations?"

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua made a frown, the other party's words had struck the nail on its head. No matter how hard Zhang Xiaohua tried, the last three variations continued to elude him. If he tried to move his body, he was unable to thrust his tree branch and when he concentrated on the latter, his footsteps would not be able to follow up, in short, his body was unable to coordinate to replicate the movement.

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's response, elder Yu said, "Since you are unable to learn it, there is no need to practice as though you cannot see night or day, haven't I

told you to train within your limits? Sometimes, rest is the best form of training.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt extremely grateful, he opened his mouth but no words were able to come out.

Elder Yu asked in a pleasant tone, “How about the sword principle, how well have you memorized it?”

Zhang Xiaohua repeated the sword principle word for word, and when elder Yu heard the former say the principle without a single error, he felt relieved in his heart and patted Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders saying, “Very good, not a single word was left out, I could tell that you have worked hard. Alright, you can practice up to here for today, rest well and not wear yourself out too much. Come, follow me back.”

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua really wanted to tell the other party, “Elder Yu, please let me off, I have yet to train my dipper heavenly fist so can’t you let me train a little longer?”

However, when he saw the concerned expression on the elder, Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and followed the latter back.

For the following period of time, Zhang Xiaohua had gotten used to such a lifestyle; he would train thrice a day in the morning, afternoon and evening. As for the work in the herb fields, such type of work was too easy for a village youth like Zhang Xiaohua who only needed to pay slightly more attention to produce perfect work. As for He Tianshu and the other’s problem of the herbs that refused to grow, Zhang Xiaohua was helpless as he only knew that plants would grow when they are sown in the earth and given water and fertilizers, so how would he be able to offer any suggestions?

The Zhang Xiaohua of that moment could empathize with his second brother Zhang Xiaohu’s devotion towards a single martial art, he practiced the stances of the martial art until he was extremely familiar to the point where his performance was like the flowing rivers and sailing clouds, or like a dance that was accompanied by song. Along with the sounds of his forceful thrusts, Zhang Xiaohua felt as though he entered a world where he was the only person and he rather enjoyed that feeling. When it came to night, Zhang Xiaohua would read some books from his stash under the oil lamp light, and through them, he was

able to connect to things he never had contact with before as though there was an entirely new world inside the books he was flipping through leisurely. Zhang Xiaohua slowly grew to love his lifestyle.

Even though Zhang Xiaohua kept on feeling that his dipper heavenly fist could produce inner energy, he had no idea what real inner energy felt like and wanted to ask He Tianshu about it. However, the latter was always frowning these days so Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to disturb him. Zhang Xiaohua also thought of asking little second Nie instead, but he wondered if he will get teased at again if it turned out to be untrue.

After brooding over it for some time, Zhang Xiaohua decided to go down to Lotus escort to hear Zhang Xiaohu's opinion.

Zhang Xiaohua first sought He Tianshu's permission before getting a waist token from the guards and leaving Huanxi mountain villa.

The first thing that came to his mind when he began his journey down was that "there are definitely roads in the mountains, and there will be Biaoche carriage station where there are roads". Even though Zhang Xiaohua wanted to hire a carriage, he thought of the number of coins in his possession and his parents in the village, before he finally decided to resist the temptation. Actually, with Zhang Xiaohua's body, it was possible for him to run all the way to the escort station but sitting on a horse carriage was a child's dream after all.

After Zhang Xiaohua extinguished the idea, he half-ran throughout the journey and managed to reach Lotus escort fairly quickly.

The escort station was not very busy that day, and the guards at the door could recognize Zhang Xiaohua. When they saw the boy who was growing even more resemblance to his second brother, the guards greeted Zhang Xiaohua and invited him straightaway.

When Zhang Xiaohua reached his second brother's room, he realized that Zhang Xiaohu was not inside but fortunately, the door was left unlocked so he assumed that the latter was still in the escort station as he entered to wait for him.

The room was tidy as usual, Zhang Xiaohu probably cleaned his room every day but when Zhang Xiaohua thought back to his own messy room, his face could

not help but turned into a shade of red. The room was same as before, there were not much changes except for a small stack of books in the middle of the table. Zhang Xiaohua felt strange, when did his second brother learnt to read?

When he walked up to the front, Zhang Xiaohua realized that some of the books were related to growing of herbs, and there were also very thick books on history. Zhang Xiaohua understood the situation, Li Jinfeng actually took his previous words for real and collected such books over probably to look for him when he had the time, and had left the books at his second brother's place for the moment.

As he was feeling bored, Zhang Xiaohua casually took out a book from the stack and began to read it with relish. There were many things written on the book, most mentioned how specialized herbalist would employ special methods to cultivate herbs which were quite relevant to what Zhang Xiaohua usually did. Zhang Xiaohua unexpectedly found several mistakes that he had made on a frequent basis so he began to read the book more carefully.

While Zhang Xiaohua was fully engrossed in the book, Zhang Xiaohu pushed open the door and upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua in his room, he said excitedly, "Xiaohua, when did you arrive?"

Zhang Xiaohua looked out at the sky and replied, "Quite a while ago, and since you were not in your room, I went ahead and read a book."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "Oh, gentleman Li brought over those books for you and we were planning to bring them over to you the next time we visit. Since you came today, we can save the trouble so you can bring them back with you later."

Chapter 116: Herb

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Herb

Zhang Xiaohua put down his book and recounted the events that had occurred to him recently to Zhang Xiaohu. Zhang Xiaohu was naturally still concerned about his right hand; Having no choice, Zhang Xiaohua raised up his right hand and curled all his fingers into a fist. Zhang Xiaohu felt relieved when he saw his younger brother regained function in all five fingers in his left hand which had turned slightly skinnier.

After chatting for some while, Zhang Xiaohua finally asked the question which was on his mind, "Second brother, how has your inner energy training been going?"

When he heard Zhang Xiaohua's question, Zhang Xiaohu's eyes brightened with excitement and he asked, "Guess?"

Seeing his second brother's response, Zhang Xiaohua could naturally understand the situation and he said in surprise, "Second brother, you've succeeded?"

Zhang Xiaohu said, "That's right, I successfully sensed inner energy a few days after I visited you."

Zhang Xiaohua asked, "In that case, second brother, does that mean that you have successfully mastered the inner energy cultivation method?"

Zhang Xiaohu shook his head and replied, "It's still too early, sensing inner energy is only the first step, and there is a long road further ahead. Being able to sense qi means that I can cultivate inner energy and can accumulate qi in my dantian thereby setting up a foundation for me to circulate qi through my meridians and activate it in the future. If I could not sense any inner energy, it

would mean that you cannot train in that inner energy cultivation method.”

These words were like cold mist surrounding Zhang Xiaohua’s head, even though he had read many books including several wuxia novels, he did not have much contact with anything relating to inner energy so the terms that Zhang Xiaohu used were all foreign to him.

Hence, he asked, “Second brother, can you explain what sensing qi is, what is dantian, and what is circulate and activate qi?”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s response, Zhang Xiaohu pondered before getting up and looking outside the room, he then closed the door and said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Actually, these terms are common words that anyone who would cultivate in inner energy would know so it would not count as a secret. Even though third master Qu said that I cannot share the inner energy cultivation method to anyone, I guess these terms should not count as part of it.”

Upon listening, Zhang Xiaohua said, “Second brother, I can go back and ask squad leader He if you are really not allowed to explain them.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “I won’t tell them to you if I am really not allowed to, how can I let you ask someone else if I am the person who introduced these terms to you?”

Zhang Xiaohua jumped in excitement and said, “I know that second brother treats me the best, quickly explain them to me.”

Zhang Xiaohu organized his thoughts and explained carefully from the beginning, “When talking about inner energy, I must first explain the concept of meridians. Meridians are paths in our body where qi can travel in order to reach every part of our body. When we perform stances while sending qi to the body parts that we activate, our stances will be complemented by inner energy. Xiaohua, do you understand up till this part?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, “I understand. Normal people will only send out physical force when they punch, but if their meridians have qi, their punch will also be complemented by inner energy, isn’t that right?”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded and continued, “That is correct. Hence, cultivating inner energy is a process of accumulating and activating qi, and accumulating qi is a

process of creating something out of nothing. Ordinary people cannot sense qi, so once someone is able to, they can be said to possess “qi sense”. With this ability to sense qi, they have reached the first stage of cultivating qi. Qi is usually stored in a place called dantian which is located in our lower abdomen and flow from this place through the meridians to all parts of our body when we activated it. In general terms, the process of training qi is to accumulate it in your dantian so when you need to activate it, there will be more for you to use and consequently, greater inner energy.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and said, “The purple sand fist thing that Yu Deyi used the previous time contains inner energy, does that mean that he activated qi from his dantian to his palms in order to generate such a powerful force?”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded and said, “That’s right, activating qi is an important process and has to follow a certain path in order for the stance to be effective. If there is any disruption in the flow of qi, the path will deviate and run to elsewhere causing the body to lose control and even leading to loss of life, this is what it means to go astray in one’s training. Actually, we do not use inner energy in our normal fist martial arts training so we cannot possibly go astray. Hehe.”

Zhang Xiaohua finally understood what it meant to go astray in his training.

He continued to ask, “How is qi produced? Does it come from the toes or leave from the fingers?”

Zhang Xiaohua was deeply curious about the warm to chilly sensation that he felt circulate around his body when he trained, it did not seem to be the qi that his brother was explaining about. Instead, the sensation that was produced while he trained in his sword martial art seemed to be more like qi but it appeared from his shoulder and not from his dantian.

Zhang Xiaohu pondered and said, “About this question, I do not know if all inner energy cultivation methods are the same or not. While I am practicing with my palms facing up, nose pointed to my mouth, mouth pointing to my heart and tongue under my upper mouth, I would feel qi flowing in from my forehead and mixing with my saliva before being swallowed into my body and reaching my dantian. This process is extremely important in cultivating inner energy, and I have been practicing to do this all these while before succeeding only recently.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, this process was extremely different from his own but he refused to concede and pressed further, “Second brother, must qi always be stored in the dantian, can it enter the body from one place and exit from another?”

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised, he wrinkled his brow and said, “About this, I am not the best person to ask. However, I have heard from third master Qu that the dantian is the control centre of qi so there is no way to train inner energy without it. Furthermore, the people in Jianghu who are considered crippled usually refer to those whose dantians were broken, so I think that it is not possible to use inner energy without it. Furthermore, qi must flow from the dantian if you use it, if it flows from somewhere else, how will you be able to use it? Will it still be considered as qi then?”

He continued to ask, “Xiaohua, why are you asking so many incredulous questions?”

Zhang Xiaohua opened his mouth but he could not say anything; he wanted to tell the truth but when his second brother mentioned about the consequences of going astray, he was afraid of affecting his second brother’s cultivation and causing the latter to worry, thus decided to keep it from him for the time being since it was not an urgent matter.

Having made up his mind, Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Isn’t that because I am curious, and now that I found someone who knows about it, I would want to ask more questions to satisfy my curiosity.”

Zhang Xiaohu thumped on his chest and said in a concerned manner, “Third master Qu also said this cultivation of qi is extremely dangerous and one should practice under an experienced master’s guidance to avoid going astray, so you must not try and emulate me anyhow.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and replied, “I understand, second brother. I do want to train as well but where will I find an inner energy cultivation method.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “That’s true.”

Zhang Xiaohu continued to ask about Zhang Xiaohua’s progress on the sixth fist stance, and was tongue-tied when he heard that Zhang Xiaohua only remembered seven stances so he could not even comfort the latter.

However, he did not say anything much when he saw Zhang Xiaohua's pleased manner at himself. Zhang Xiaohu actually wanted to ask Zhang Xiaohua on his progress on other fist martial arts but he was worried that the latter had met with more obstacles and inquiring further would add salt onto his wounds so he bit his tongue instead.

The two brothers caught up with each other's lives and time flew past as they chatted. Half a day went by quickly and the sky turned dark soon enough. Zhang Xiaohua bid his second brother farewell and returned to Huanxi mountain villa.

When he reached Huanxi mountain villa, the sky was already pitch black. Zhang Xiaohua was walking on the small path which led back to his room while carrying the small collection of books on herbs, it was funny when he thought about it, Li Jinfeng actually took his joke for real, how could he be so ... that wasn't right, Zhang Xiaohua immediately understood his intentions when he recalled Li Jinfeng's behaviour during his previous visit. This gentleman Li was quite meticulous, but when he thought of how well elder sister Qiu Tong treated himself, coupled with Li Jinfeng's sincere and honest pursuit, Zhang Xiaohua felt inclined to doing something for them even though he was not sure what he could do, perhaps he would think of something later.

When he entered the courtyard and passed by He Tianshu's room, he noticed that the interior was lit up. Zhang Xiaohua could guess that He Tianshu was probably reading in his room so he walked towards the door. He Tianshu's hoarse voice sounded from inside before he could knock on the door, "Who is it, just come in."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised as he pushed open the door, he entered and asked in a curious tone, "Squad leader He, how did you know that someone was coming even before I knocked?"

When He Tianshu saw that it was Zhang Xiaohua who entered, he smiled and said, "About this, you will naturally find out once you can train in inner energy. As long as you send your inner energy to your ear, you will be able to hear any movement within several zhang of your surroundings."

Zhang Xiaohua asked in an amazed tone, "Ah! How can it be so mysterious?"

He Tianshu replied, "This depends on the profoundness of one's inner energy,

some people can even pick up sounds of ten plus zhang around them.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes turned into many little stars.

However, he thought back to how he would also be able to sense when there was someone outside walking, although it was only a feeling.

He Tianshu asked, “You went over to Lotus escort right, how is your second brother?”

Zhang Xiaohua happily replied, “That’s right, squad leader He, I have not seen my second brother for a while so I went to visit him. He is doing well and training in inner energy method now.”

“Ah...” He Tianshu was slightly surprised and asked, “He had the qi sense so soon?”

Zhang Xiaohua said proudly, “Yes, didn’t I say that my second brother is a genius?”

He Tianshu replied, “I did not expect your second brother to develop the qi sense that soon but I didn’t say that he was a genius. This thing called qi sense is very complicated and not everyone can develop it. However, your brother cannot be considered a genius as a normal Piaomiao sect disciple would be able to have qi sense within three days of training.”

“Oh, so it’s like that.” Zhang Xiaohua’s mouth was gaped wide open, he initially thought that his second brother was worthy of being his idol but now, hadn’t all Piaomiao sect disciples superseded his personal idol?

His idol was still too weak.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at He Tianshu and asked again, “How long did squad leader He obtain his qi sense?”

He Tianshu scratched his head as though he was trying hard to remember and replied, “I think I took four days, my own aptitude isn’t too good so I was arranged to be put in the pharmacy hall.”

“Sigh,” Zhang Xiaohua sighed and lowered his head, “I guess I will be sent to the food preparation room then.”

“You dream; how can it be so easy to enter Piaomiao sect?” He Tianshu did not

bother to be considerate and said honestly.

Zhang Xiaohua's expression was naturally hurt after his dignity was attacked.

Unexpectedly, He Tianshu continued to say, "If you entered Piaomiao sect in your youth, you will probably be sent to the weapons hall."

Zhang Xiaohua's expression turned into one of joy as he said, "Weapons hall? It sounds quite cool, what does it do?"

He Tianshu said, "Piaomiao sect's armoury, your superhuman strength will be highly valued over there."

"Ah....so it's like that." Zhang Xiaohua understood that the other party did not put much worth to his own aptitude. However, it was strange to think about it, his strength was pretty normal when he was young so why did it grow so strong now?

Could it be the spring water?

Just as he was pondering, He Tianshu asked, "Oh right, why did you come here?"

Zhang Xiaohua then recalled his purpose and asked, "Squad leader He, I have seen you frowning quite often recently and according to little second Nie, it is due to the herbs which are not sprouting."

"Mm, that's right, it has almost been a year so I am quite frustrated." He Tianshu sighed and did not hesitate to confide to Zhang Xiaohua, "These herbs were sown in the beginning of the year but they refused to sprout for some unknown reason. Honestly, I am quite helpless about it right now, and it would affect the other plans of our sect as many things would require the use of these herbs, that..."

After speaking up to here, He Tianshu suddenly stopped as though he had revealed too much and said sheepishly, "In short, I am feeling quite guilty."

Zhang Xiaohua brought out the collection of books in his hands and said, "Oh, gentleman Li Jinfeng passed me some books on herbs when I went down to visit my second brother, I thought of bringing them to you to see if they are of any help."

Upon hearing his reply, He Tianshu smiled as he patted Zhang Xiaohua's shoulders and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, thank you, you are quite considerate for doing this."

"However," when He Tianshu received the books and took a quick glance at all of them, he said apologetically, "Even though I can read, most of the books I read are related to martial arts, I don't quite understand these type of books. Furthermore, the pharmacy hall has been investigating this matter every day and they should be quite well-read, so I am sure that they would have known all the things written in these books."

Zhang Xiaohua did not agree with the other party's sentiments and he said, "These books are written by a person, and everyone would have different experiences when researching the same thing. As the saying goes, many thoughts go far, so I am sure they can be of help."

He Tianshu was wordless, he did not have the experience of creating the "dipper heavenly fist" though combining ordinary fist martial arts so he naturally snorted at the idea. However, his head turned slightly and he said, "How about this, Zhang Xiaohua, you are the most gifted among us few so this task will be borne by you. Go take a look at these books, and if they are still not enough, I can bring over some more from the pharmacy hall, what do you think?"

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, how did it come to this? He was only offering an alternative out of goodwill but the other party actually pushed the burden onto himself, how would he dare to speak up in the future? If the reply would always be "Good idea, I'll leave it to you", then who would dare to offer any suggestions? Such a bureaucratic way of doing things.

However, Zhang Xiaohua was still unable to reject He Tianshu's orders so he nodded his head in compliance. Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's helpless response, He Tianshu felt equally helpless; he had thrown half of such a heavy burden onto the boy not because he wanted to dampen his spirits and treat a dead horse like a live one, but he thought it would be good for the boy to try and even if he failed, there was no further implications apart from Zhang Xiaohua reading a few more books. As for the person who was in charge of the overall result, it was still He Tianshu who had to bear all responsibility of failure anyway.

Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and carried the books back into his own room, lit the lamp and did not hurry to start slipping through the pages. Instead, he picked up the lantern and went to the forest to begin his daily routine of practicing the fist and sword martial art.

Sword arts are used to protect one's life so there would only be benefits if one becomes more familiar in them. After so many days of practice, the time it took for the warm feeling to flow from his right shoulder to his fingertips had hastened quite a bit while the speed of his hand when executing the movements had also increased. The angle of the direction had also changed slightly, Zhang Xiaohua felt strange about the way his left hand sword martial arts were progressing, could the sword martial art be improving with him at the same time?

His right hand was still its old self, it did not change like the left hand sword martial art but he could feel his right fingers becoming more nimble and the injury heading toward recovery.

The thing that led Zhang Xiaohua to be most excited was still the self-created dipper heavenly fist, the hundred and eight stances did not change like the left hand sword martial art. Even though it was not martial arts learnt from elsewhere, the movements had already stabilized and the flowing sensation would reappear every ninth cycle as usual, and the only change was that the flow seemed to be slightly stronger.

However, Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly dejected, how good would it be if the sensation stayed in his body instead? The feeling would flow into his body and leave right after he finished the movement, but what good was that? Was it vacationing in his body? It was such a mystery.

After he finished his routine practice, Zhang Xiaohua returned to his room, found the book which he read halfway in the afternoon and continued to read it with relish. Since he had finished the books in his room and had no other places to get more. Now that Zhang Xiaohua had cultivated the habit of reading regularly, these professional books were much better reading materials than the over-read books in his room.

Thus, apart from his morning, afternoon and evening martial arts practice each

day, Zhang Xiaohua's life had a new "lesson" to attend, and apart from working in the herb fields, Zhang Xiaohua could be seen carrying a book wherever he went.

Zhang Xiaohua was not just reading, he would many times make changes to his own work as he tried to combine the theoretical with practical, but He Tianshu and the others only took care of a small area with lesser variety of herbs, of which most were not found in the books, so Zhang Xiaohua would go to Tian Zhongxi and the others' fields to try out his experiments.

Tian Zhongxi was not concerned much, as the manager of the fields, he was happy that Zhang Xiaohua was taking his job and studies so seriously but Ma Jing and the others did not think the same way. Perhaps they were jealous of Zhang Xiaohua's better meal plan, or envious that he could read, so they would continuously make scathing remarks, but how would Zhang Xiaohua listen to them? He only treated their words like the bark of dogs.

Hence, the days went by in this environment of barking dogs and littered chicken feathers.

Chapter 117: Inner courtyard

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Inner courtyard

However, after Zhang Xiaohua finished reading all those books, he realized that the content in the books were too rudimentary and his thirst for more knowledge remained unsatisfied, it was wishful thinking if he could use the knowledge he learnt from these books to solve the problems of the herbs which were not growing.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua helplessly threw the books at the head of his bed where he would flip through them when he was bored.

Without any newer books to read, Zhang Xiaohua went back to his previous habit of working and practicing martial arts, reading still remained his habit but Zhang Xiaohua would never spend money on new books, as the saying goes, one does not have to read the book if he cannot borrow it, but Zhang Xiaohua was slightly disappointed in his heart.

When He Tianshu who had gotten used to seeing Zhang Xiaohua walked around with his nose in a book returning to his old habit, he asked the latter in curiosity if he had given up on his experiments because it was too difficult. When he heard Zhang Xiaohua's reasons, He Tianshu did not believe him initially but when he thought back to the "Words explanation" which the boy memorized, the wrinkle between his brow smoothed and he snapped his right fingers while saying, "Isn't the solution simple?"

He then muttered into little second Nie's ear, and the latter looked at Zhang Xiaohua with wide eyes as he listened to He Tianshu's instructions causing Zhang Xiaohua to feel a shiver up his bones, what was going on? After they finished, little second Nie left as instructed while He Tianshu smiled gleefully at Zhang

Xiaohua and said, "Alright, just wait a moment and you will see what I am capable of."

Zhang Xiaohua rolled his eyes and pursed his lips as he muttered under his breath, "What are you capable of? Why must you be so serious, I will just wait and see."

Little second Nie was gone for half a day after he left and only came back in the middle of the night with empty hands. When He Tianshu saw that he returned empty handed, he asked in surprised, "Did you fail?"

Little second Nie replied, "Elder He said that the books in the library are only for disciples to read, others are not allowed to view them."

He Tianshu wrinkled his brows and asked, "You did not look for hallmaster Bai?"

Little second Nie smiled bitterly and said, "I did, but hallmaster Bai hardly bothered and said that you were calling for all kind of doctors after being afflicted by an illness, and a boy without any foundations could not solve any problem just from reading some books so you should look for another idea. He also told me to inform you that he was discussing the matter with the other elders so you should not cause any trouble for him."

He Tianshu's face turned into an ugly shade of green and red, he looked at Zhang Xiaohua's expression and felt embarrassed, however, his pupils rolled as though he thought of an idea and his face softened. He said, "Zhang Xiaohua, return to you room first. I will bring the books over to you in a while."

Zhang Xiaohua looked curiously at the other party before nodding his head in agreement and returning back to his room.

Since someone was helping him find more books to read, Zhang Xiaohua would naturally follow his instructions respectfully.

Indeed, not long after, He Tianshu smiled happily as he hugged a dump of books and poured them onto Zhang Xiaohua's bed. He patted his hands and said, "Alright, Zhang Xiaohua, I have finally gotten you the books so have fun reading them."

Zhang Xiaohua looked in puzzlement at the dump of books on his bed and

asked in a curious tone, “Why are there so many, where did squad leader He get them from?”

He Tianshu purposely said in a mysterious tone, “This master He has many secret methods, how can I be stumped by this little problem? Hehe, look carefully, Zhang Xiaohua, there is no need to bother about our hallmaster’s words, my instructions to you are still the same. If you can solve, then great, if not, treat this as broadening your knowledge. Furthermore...”

He Tianshu hesitated for a while before continuing, “Jianghu is filled with danger and evilness, how will a little child like you protect yourself? It is best if you can pick up something from these books and lead a good life in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua understood He Tianshu’s kind intentions and he could not help but feel extremely grateful to the latter. As the saying goes, people are not trees, how can they not have feelings? Even though he had no blood ties or relations with He Tianshu, the latter had treated him so kindly during the period they knew each other; even when leaving out that he taught Zhang Xiaohua martial arts, He Tianshu even bothered to think and plan for Zhang Xiaohua’s future. It could be seen that this dangerous and evil Jianghu still had a shred of warmth in the well of coldness and traps.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “I understand, squad leader He, I will not let you down and at least learn many things, okay?”

He Tianshu nodded and said, “As long as you understand, go ahead and read, I will be off now.”

After finishing his sentence, he smiled and turned to exit the room while Zhang Xiaohua saw him off. By the time he left the room and was about to head back, He Tianshu turned around and said, “Oh right, Zhang Xiaohua, I almost forgot but how is your fist martial arts? We have not practiced together in a long time.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled gleefully and said, “Pretty good, squad leader He. I managed to put together the fist martial arts you taught me and the fist martial arts my brother shared, and can now practice properly.”

He Tianshu smiled back, “Not bad, Zhang Xiaohua, you will turn out alright since you are so creative. Practice well and show it to me when the opportunity arises.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Sure, no problem, squad leader He, whenever you like."

He Tianshu said, "You won't forget this time?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "Definitely not, you can rest well."

He Tianshu said, "Alright, then I will look at it when I have the time. Go ahead and read your books, I'll be off now."

After finishing his sentence, he stepped out as Zhang Xiaohua watched him leave and just as he was about to return, He Tianshu turned around again and said, "Oh, I almost forgot, Zhang Xiaohua."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he turned back and asked, "What is the matter, squad leader He?"

He Tianshu said, "The books there are all borrowed from the villa master, she said that she was happy that you wanted to read them, and if you are done with them, she has many more that you can take freely. Just look for Qiu Tong when you want to do so."

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua grew elated and he said, "Really, that's great. Thank you, squad leader He."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "You don't have to thank me, alright, quickly go read your books."

After finishing, he lifted his foot and prepared to walk away. Zhang Xiaohua watched him leave quietly this time.

Just as He Tianshu was about to take his first step, he turned around again and said, "Oh, I almost forgot, Zhang Xiaohua..."

When he saw Zhang Xiaohua still standing at the door smiling widely at himself, he became surprised and asked, "Zhang Xiaohua, why have you not gone back in?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and replied, "I was waiting for squad leader He to tell me the thing he 'almost forgot'."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "It's like this, like this..."

He Tianshu put on an odd expression so Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows and asked, "What is it?"

He Tianshu pursed his lips and said, "I really forgot this time, forget it. I will tell you tomorrow when I remember it."

After finishing his sentence, he turned around and returned into his room.

Zhang Xiaohua was even more determined to stay at the door and watch silently as He Tianshu returned to his own room, he saw the latter slapped his forehead as he walked until he reached his own room before Zhang Xiaohua felt assured and closed his door.

When He Tianshu entered his room, he was still thinking, what did he want to say?

Up until the night grew late, He Tianshu was fumbling around and trying to recall what he was planning to say to the boy until a silver of white like the underbelly of a fish appeared in the sky when he suddenly sat up and laughed heartily, "I finally remembered, I was going to tell Zhang Xiaohua not to read too late into the night and to take care of his health."

With a new program in his schedule, Zhang Xiaohua naturally stopped feeling bored, his days were passed reading books and practicing martial arts, then practicing martial arts and reading more books. However, with the more herb-related books he read, the more Zhang Xiaohua realized the complexity of profoundness of the subject, he felt admiration towards the authors of the book and more gratitude towards Li Jinfeng who taught him to read, as well as the Huanxi mountain villa master who gave him the chance to read so many books. Finally, he was thankful to his parents for letting him step out into the world, hahaha, perhaps he can ask the villa master one day when he met her if she could give his parents a job as well.

As the saying goes, the more one knows, the more he realizes that there were things he did not understand, Zhang Xiaohua had entered such a state at that moment.

From the additional books that He Tianshu brought over, Zhang Xiaohua realized that they were too many things he was unaware of, and in the pursuit of more knowledge, he even forgot the original reason why he started to read

those books, and forgot that he had to find out the reasons why the herbs did not sprout. He actually agreed with pharmacy hall hallmaster, one cannot solve the current problem just by reading a few more books. If it could be done, the pharmacy hall hallmaster would have already solved the problem long ago.

The only thing was, Zhang Xiaohua had deeply immersed himself in this wondrous world of herbology.

During that afternoon, Zhang Xiaohua returned to his room after his routine martial art practice and was about to pick another book when he suddenly remembered, he had already read all the books the previous night. Zhang Xiaohua flipped through the books he had on hand in boredom; he had a bad habit when reading and it was that he disliked reading a book a second time. Even though He Tianshu brought many books for him to read, Zhang Xiaohua would read in the day and at night, thus his speed of going through the books was very fast. Suddenly, Zhang Xiaohua remembered that He Tianshu had also previously mentioned that he could look for Qiu Tong if he finished those books, and when he thought about how long it has been since he met his elder sister Qiu Tong, he decided to use this opportunity to see her again.

After making up his mind, Zhang Xiaohua hugged the collection of books and went to look for He Tianshu.

He Tianshu's door was shut tight and Zhang Xiaohua called out from outside for quite a while without hearing any response, thus he assumed that the former was not in. This made Zhang Xiaohua anxious, he had never entered the inner courtyard before, so he did not know where elder sister Qiu Tong would be, not to mention the villa master.

Just as he was about to return to his own room, Zhang Xiaohua remembered that he had went in previously to find elder Yu, and the latter would surely know where he should go. Thus, he hugged his books and went through the inner circular door into the inner courtyard.

After passing by several courtyards, he finally reached the one where elder Yu was staying, but by some unfortunate coincidence, the latter was also not in his room. Zhang Xiaohua was exasperated by then, what day was it that day? He did not look at the announcement book, could there be something important going

on?

Since he had already entered the inner courtyard, he might as well go in further to look around, and he could always ask the first person he met for directions. He was not afraid of being misunderstood as a stranger since he was also an employee of the Huanxi mountain villa, but he had forgotten that the azure robed little hats men would seldom enter the inner courtyard which was primarily reserved for the fairer sex.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was walking around, he heard a high pitched scream, “Where did this child come from? How did he manage to come here?”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised and he stopped in his tracks, could the unknown person be referring to him?

When he turned around to look, there was indeed a lady carrying some laundry that had been washed and was preparing to sun them.

Zhang Xiaohua quickly bowed and said, “I am from the outside herb fields, a subordinate of squad leader He, I came in to look for elder sister Qiu Tong.”

When the lady heard his reply, her expression turned into one of suspicion, she put down the clothes and walked over to ask, “Squad leader He’s subordinate, why have I not heard of it before? How could you enter the pharmacy hall at such a young age?”

Zhang Xiaohua naturally realized that the other party had mistook him for a Piaomiao sect member, and thought it was too bothersome to explain so he said, “I came over not long ago, and am not from the pharmacy hall, which is why elder sister cannot recognize me. You only need to find elder sister Qiu Tong to understand the situation.”

The lady felt that his explanation was reasonable so she replied, “Since you are new, you probably do not know the villa rules. This inner courtyard cannot be entered without prior permission; I guess that squad leader He must have made a mistake by looking at your age. You must not do this in the future, or if the villa master learns about it, you will be beaten with a rod.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he swallowed his tongue and said, “So serious, I did not know about this.”

However, he was also thinking secretly, “This squad leader He as well, why did he not inform me properly and even asked me to find the villa master myself? The feeling of the rod striking my butt must not be nice at all, why did Tian Zhongxi not say anything before as well? This is so strange.”

Actually, everything was purely a misunderstanding. Tian Zhongxi knew that Zhang Xiaohua was brought in by Qiu Tong and assumed that she had already told the boy of the villa rules, but Qiu Tong had only seen Zhang Xiaohua as a little brother so she did not see any taboo in anything he did. When Zhang Xiaohua first entered, she did want to discipline Zhang Xiaohua but the villa master’s words “fight for himself” stopped her and she left the entire matter at the back of her mind. The more miraculous part was after Zhang Xiaohua came back from the escort station, everyone treated him as an “experienced” employee and no longer thought of him as a newcomer.

Fortunately, his age was small so the lady was not too bothered, so she left after instructing the boy to “stay in the same spot while she go look for Qiu Tong.”

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua stood at where he was and studied the small courtyard with a curious mind, the courtyard was slightly smaller than the one he lived in but it was extremely tidy. There were even some plants decorating the walls which made Zhang Xiaohua thought back to his sister-in-law, didn’t the latter also loved to plant such plants around the household?

When he thought back to the lady who was about to sun the clothes, he bent his head and pondered before walking up to the front and putting his books down onto the stone table. Then, he took the clothes that were already washed and hung them to dry one by one.

These were chores that Zhang Xiaohua was used to while living at home, he would often help his mother and was thus familiar with the steps, so he finished the task very soon. Just as the clothes were drying, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but thought about the past.

He carried the books back to wait at the entrance feeling strange in his heart, even though he would miss home, it was not as frequent as when he just entered the inner courtyard for a while, so why was he being this way?

Just as he was reflecting, Zhang Xiaohua felt someone coming from afar and even though he could not hear their footsteps, he was still able to sense their presence. Indeed, the lady led Qiu Tong over soon after, and when Qiu Tong saw Zhang Xiaohua from afar, she said happily, “It is indeed you, Zhang Xiaohua, Qiu Ju said that a child was looking for me but she could not provide a name so I immediately guessed that it would be you.”

Upon seeing Qiu Ju whose face had turned red, Zhang Xiaohua felt awkward as he had forgotten to even introduce himself before coming over, so he said, “Elder sister Qiu Ju ran away too soon and I also forgot to tell her my name.”

Qiu Tong smiled and said, “Xiaohua is a sensible boy who knows how to cover for other people, but this Qiu Ju’s carelessness is not a secret among us. Alright, follow me in, why did you suddenly come to visit me today?”

After finishing her words, she brought Zhang Xiaohua further inside.

When Qiu Ju saw the two left, her face gradually regained its original colour and she scolded herself silently for being so careless again. Just as she was about to continue with her task, she noticed the clothes that were already hung and the face flushed to an even greater shade of red. This little boy was so hardworking that he helped her with a chore, but how could a lady’s intimate clothing be touched by a man? Even if he was only a ten plus year old boy!

Qiu Ju stood there in the courtyard wondering if she should wash her clothes again

What a messed up situation.....

How would Zhang Xiaohua know that his good deed had turned into a bad one, he happily told Qiu Tong of his motive.

When Qiu Tong heard that Zhang Xiaohua was reading books regarding herbs, she was happy and stroke Zhang Xiaohua’s head like he was her little brother. She smiled and said, “Xiaohua, you are quite awesome. You could only recognize a few words when you first entered, but can already read books now. It would be great if you can help the villa master solve the problem about the herbs.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied seriously, “Elder sister Qiu Tong, the reason why I can read is thanks to the gentleman Li whom you met the previous time. Oh right, he

also said that he wanted to see you the last time he and my second brother came here to visit me.”

Qiu Tong was surprised but she soon understood the situation, she smiled and asked, “Did gentleman Li told you to say this?”

Zhang Xiaohua quickly explained, “I wanted to tell this to you but gentleman Li disallowed me, so I mentioned about him casually. If you want to know, you can just ask him yourself the next time he comes.”

Qiu Tong laughed as she said, “In the future then, let’s try to help the villa master solve her problem first.”

Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly added, “Gentleman Li also gave me some related books in the beginning.”

However, when he noticed that Qiu Tong was uninterested in discussing the topic further, he said, “But I feel that just by reading such books, I will only learn the theory which is insufficient to be of use. Even though theory comes from experience, it is on a higher level than actual practice, and when the experts share their theories with us through books, we still have to learn to apply such theories back onto the fields for it to be part of our own knowledge, and only then can there be practical use to theory.”

Upon listening to his words, Qiu Tong stopped in her footsteps and asked, “Who told you all these?”

Upon seeing that the other party had stopped, Zhang Xiaohua also halted his tracks and said, “These are what I learn from reading those books, could I have misunderstood something?”

Qiu Tong smiled as she replied, “You are absolutely right, but these words seemed to be spoken often by the villa master as well so I thought that you heard them from somewhere. Alright, let’s hurry, the villa master and others seemed to be busy in the main hall so I will bring you to get more books.”

Chapter 118: Villa master

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Villa master

However, Qiu Tong changed her mind not long after.

Ou Yan did not inform Qiu Tong on which books Zhang Xiaohua could borrow, and it was not appropriate for anyone to enter the villa master's study room without any prior permission.

Hence, Qiu Tong led Zhang Xiaohua towards the main hall instead.

As they neared the main hall, Zhang Xiaohua could hear two people having a conversation. One of them had a melodious voice like a yellow oriole which one would not even get tired to listening to, while the other had a rounded articulation and spoke in a pace that was neither too fast nor slow.

Zhang Xiaohua immediately guessed that the owner of the melodious voice was the villa master.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua had already tried to construct the image of the villa master since he entered the mountain villa, the latter had treated him extremely well for the past few months and since he had yet to meet the other party personally, he wanted to give his thanks even more so now since he was borrowing more books from her.

Qiu Tong instructed Zhang Xiaohua to wait outside while she entered the hall.

When Qiu Tong entered the main hall, the two voices stopped as well. Zhang Xiaohua heard Qiu Tong said, "Villa master, Zhang Xiaohua from the herb fields came over to return the books and would like to borrow more, which books are he allowed to borrow?"

This time, Zhang Xiaohua perked his ear to listen carefully to the voice which

replied.

Unfortunately to his disappointment, the other warm voice sounded, “Ah..... so soon? This child did not just flip through the pages blindly right? Let him come in, I will question him to see if he truly understands the contents, and it will not be too late for him to borrow more books after that.”

It seems that the melodious voice was not from Ou Yan speaking.

Qiu Tong went out and motioned Zhang Xiaohua to come inside, and when the latter entered carefully, he saw a twenty plus year old lady who was extremely pretty sitting on the other side, her demeanour was like Liu Qing, her skin was white and bright, and if not for the phoenix eyes which were unlike Liu Qing’s almond shaped ones, Zhang Xiaohua almost called out “sister-in-law”. On the other side in the same hall, there seated a middle aged lady with ordinary features and dark skin, and even though her clothes were brightly coloured, they could not conceal her barrel shaped body.

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, could the melodious voice from before came from such a lady.

At that moment, Ou Yan spoke up, “You are Zhang Xiaohua?”

Zhang Xiaohua quickly retracted his gaze and bowed deeply before replying, “Indeed, elder sister villa master, I am Zhang Xiaohua.”

Ou Yan was slightly surprised and she almost let out a laugh, “Elder sister? Haha, it has been a long time since someone called me that. Zhang Xiaohua, your little mouth can speak such sweet words.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not feel the same way so he scratched his head and asked, “Is there a problem, elder sister villa master?”

Ou Yan was not upset, she asked, “Why did you think of calling me elder sister?”

Zhang Xiaohua felt strange, and he replied, “Villa master is older so I have to call her elder sister. Furthermore, villa master looks so much like my sister in law that I almost called her sister-in-law. Oh right, my sister-in-law is called Liu Qing, and I would call her elder sister Liu Qing before she married my eldest brother. Thus, I feel that villa master is familiar, so I should naturally call her elder sister.”

The dark skinned lady on the other side spoke and the melodious tone of her voice sounded, “Haha, this Zhang Xiaohua is quite interesting, I have not seen such an innocent child for a long time.”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the lady and he could not help but reply, “Elder sister’s voice is very nice to listen to.”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “You can call her elder sister Qin, just call her more often and she will respond to you so you can hear more of her voice.”

The other lady was actually Piaomiao sect’s Mingcui hall hallmaster Madam Qin.

Upon hearing her reply, Zhang Xiaohua said honestly, “Greetings to elder sister Qin.”

Madam Qin was surprised and she laughed, “Other people call me Madam Qin, but this little child actually called me elder sister Qin instead. Never mind, it sounds quite pleasant anyway. If you need my help in the future, feel free to look for this elder sister.”

Ou Yan laughed even more as she said, “Zhang Xiaohua, what are you waiting for. Hurry and thank elder sister Qin; she does not do this often at all.”

Zhang Xiaohua felt like a dense fog was covering his head, he bowed politely, “Thank you elder sister Qin.”

However, he did not think the same way in his heart, there would not be a biscuit that would fall from the sky into his hands so easily; it was the first time he was meeting the other party and she would not help him so simply just because he called her so he assumed that Ou Yan was probably playing a fool.

Everyone laughed and commented a little more.

Ou Yan then asked Zhang Xiaohua, “Zhang Xiaohua, you have read all these books? Did you understand them?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered honestly, “I have finished them, elder sister villa master.”

Ou Yan’s brows wrinkled as she said, “Elder sister villa master sounds quite uncomfortable, you can call me elder sister Ou or elder sister Yan instead.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and said, “I understand, elder sister Ou.”

Ou Yan still did not believe Zhang Xiaohua completely, she said, “Zhang Xiaohua, the worst thing there is while reading such books is to form a superficial understanding from them, it is not good to be too greedy for knowledge. I have heard from He Tianshu that you borrowed quite a few books the previous time, and now that you came over with so many books, are you sure that you have finished reading them and are able to recall their contents?”

Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly anxious and he said, “Really, elder sister Ou, I understand them completely. However, because of that, I feel as though there are more things I do not understand.”

When Ou Yan heard his reply, the wrinkle between her brows smoothed and she said, “In that case, I shall test you with some questions.”

After finishing her sentence, Ou Yan flipped through the pages and picked a few questions for Zhang Xiaohua to answer.

In Zhang Xiaohua’s opinions, those questions were not questions at all since the answers were written clearly on the book, hence he answered all of them smoothly without any pause.

Upon seeing the speed of Zhang Xiaohua’s response, Ou Yan was very happy and she almost seemed to read Zhang Xiaohua’s mind as she asked him more questions which answers are not directly from the books.

This time, Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a moment before replying to the questions according to the knowledge he gained from reading the books.

Ou Yan grew even happier when she heard his answers, she first pointed out the weaknesses in his answers before saying, “Zhang Xiaohua, you could actually understand many of the principles inside these books, good job. Wait a while, I will bring you more books and if you encounter any areas which you don’t understand, you can come and ask me in the future.”

After finishing her sentence, she bid Madam Qin farewell and led Qiu Tong out of the hall with a big smile on her face.

Hence, only Zhang Xiaohua and Madam Qin were left together in the main hall.

Madam Qin looked at Zhang Xiaohua who had his head lowered and she asked him about the things that happened to him recently. Zhang Xiaohua did not hide anything from this elder sister with the melodious voice, he shared how he came to Pingyang city, how he entered Huanxi mountain villa as well as the events that led to his injury, leaving only the matter about the dipper heavenly fist and sword martial arts out of his recount. Madam Qin was marvelled when she heard of Zhang Xiaohua's life, she recalled her eventful youth and naturally felt closer to Zhang Xiaohua.

Just as the two were chatting, Ou Yan returned with Qiu Tong carrying a white cloth bundle that seemed heavy behind her. Zhang Xiaohua quickly went over to relieve Qiu Tong of her burden, his hands slumped when he received the bundle, and he guessed that there must be many books inside.

Ou Yan reseated herself and said, "Zhan Xiaohua, these are books that I have picked for you in consideration of your situation, so do your best to read them. Earlier, I heard from Qiu Tong that you understood the importance of practical experience, this is very good and you should continue on that path to improve your knowledge to walk as far as you can. It will be benefit to both you and our mountain villa in the future."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Alright, elder sister Ou, I will work hard to read them and comprehend their meanings in hopes of solving elder sister Ou's problem with the seeds."

When he mentioned the matter of the seeds, a frown naturally appeared on Ou Yan's face as she said, "It is good to aim high, but if the answer to the problem of the seeds could be found in the books, I would have solved the problem much earlier."

Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly embarrassed; it seemed that now was not a good time to express his goals so he said, "As the saying goes, three smelly cobblers wins over Zhuge Liang*, when everybody brainstorms together, perhaps an idea can be found."

*TN: Zhuge Liang-famous historical figure/ war strategist

Ou Yan smiled and said, "Your words are reasonable, however, there are many things that cannot be solved with just numbers, the quality of the people is more

important than the quantity in these cases.”

She then coughed and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, first take a look at these books. After a while later, I will bring you to meet an expert to watch how he tends to the herbs.”

Upon listening to these words, Qiu Tong’s face changed its colour and she said, “Young mistress, have you decided to go yourself?”

Madam Qin also said, “Yan’er, you have to think through this thoroughly. The road is long and far, can your body take the stress of the journey?”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “Elder sister Qin do not have to worry about me, even though the journey will be slightly far, hadn’t Qiu Tong gone through it as well? this body of mine is not anywhere weaker than hers, so how will I not be able to endure it?”

Qiu Tong half-pleaded, “Young mistress, it is better if I go again this time. As the villa master, it would be better for you to stay in the mountain villa and let us servants run these kind of errands.”

Ou Yan smiled bitterly and said, “A year has passed in a blink of an eye, there are still no change in these seeds which will cause quite a large problem in Piaomiao sect. I have already promised in front of my elder brother, so won’t I become the sect’s enemy if I do not deliver on my promises?”

Madam Qin persuaded as well, “These seeds have already been lost long ago and the methods to cultivate them have been lost with them. Even though you have promised in front of the sect master, most of the herbs have grown so why go through all these trouble just for a little of them?”

Ou Yan’s expression turned bitterer as she said, “It is precisely because this little part is that important. The last time Qiu Tong went over, the other party did not open the door to entertain her, and I suspect that he is doubtful of our sincerity. If I do not go this time round, then won’t we be breaking off this road?”

Madam Qin and Qiu Tong saw that their persuasion was ineffective so they did not continue any further. Only Zhang Xiaohua who was listening to the three’s conversation was still clueless of what they were talking about, but he seemed to

recall Qiu Tong mentioning that she had gone somewhere south while he was injured which was why she did not visit him. From this, he guessed that it was related to the herbs that would not sprout, but the other party deemed Qiu Tong's position as inferior so he did not open his doors for her, which was why Qiu Tong returned empty handed and Ou Yan was personally making the trip this time round. Mm, after listening to Ou Yan's words, she probably meant to bring him along, and the other two were trying to stop her because they were afraid that an accident would occur on someone of her position.

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and observed the three people's reactions, he quickly thanked Ou Yan for the books and bid his farewell. Ou Yan smiled and added some words of encouragement before letting Qiu Tong take him away.

Qiu Tong's mood was not very good, she was dejected as she led Zhang Xiaohua back to the courtyard where he met Qiu Ju and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, if you want to look for the villa master or me in the future, do not just charge in like this time. Even though you are still young, the villa rules have to be followed so you can wait here for Qiu Ju or someone else to ask them to look for me inside, understand?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "I got it, elder sister Qiu Tong, don't be sad, I believe the problem will eventually be solved."

Qiu Tong smiled weakly back and said, "Alright, Xiaohua, work hard as well. I hope that you would become of help in the future."

As she watched Zhang Xiaohua dragged the bundle of books back, Qiu Tong then turned around and returned to her own place.

Zhang Xiaohua's left hand was gripping onto the bundle of books as he walked, and thanks to his five hundred jin of strength, he was able to carry such a heavy bundle with ease. If it was someone else, they would have their work cut out for them, who knew how Qiu Tong was able to carry all those books from the study room in the first place?

When Zhang Xiaohua returned to his room, he threw the bundle of books onto his bed, drank some water, and opened the bundle to take a look. He could not help but gaped in wonderment, "Oh my goodness, there are so many of them. There has to be at least dozens of books here, no wonder they are so heavy."

However, a smile appeared in the frown on Zhang Xiaohua's face, these many books would mean that he could be kept preoccupied for the following days to come.

In the night after Zhang Xiaohua finished his martial art practice, he casually took out a book when he suddenly realized the difference between them and the books he had read before. Firstly, the books before were foundational books but these were obviously more profound which was just suited for Zhang Xiaohua's current standard of knowledge. Just by running through their covers, Zhang Xiaohua could feel an itch in his heart which made he wanted to start reading immediately. Secondly, unlike the previous books which were crisp and clean, these books were tattered and filled with untidy scribbles all over the place. Zhang Xiaohua had to squint his eyes to read them, and realized that those were notes written by the previous reader; this method of reading was still the first time Zhang Xiaohua encountered, his eyes naturally brightened as he read them carefully.

The more Zhang Xiaohua read, the more astonished he became, and he could not help but feel a deep sense of admiration for the author of the notes. These words on the blank sides of the book pages contained the essence of each paragraph while adding on several related information which revealed the profoundness of his knowledge. While looking through them, Zhang Xiaohua suddenly recalled something and he picked up another book from his bed, flipped it open, and indeed the book had many tiny scribbles as well. Zhang Xiaohua checked through several other books and the result was still the same.

Zhang Xiaohua felt enlightened, such elegant handwriting probably belonged to the villa master Ou Yan. When he saw how large the collection of books was, and assumed that the latter had probably went through them in detail, Zhang Xiaohua felt a deep sense of admiration in his heart.

Another thing was gratitude, this villa master elder sister did not treat him as an outsider, she generously shared the books she had read through thoroughly to him. Right at that moment, Zhang Xiaohua actually put elder sister Ou in a position above his own sister-in-law within his heart.

With a sufficiently wide collection, Zhang Xiaohua's life naturally became richer; whether it was working in the herb fields, practicing martial arts in the

forest or reading books under the oil lamp light, Zhang Xiaohua would keep himself occupied and satisfied at all time.

The only thing was during the brief moments of idleness, Zhang Xiaohua would think of one thing, travelling afar!

The last time elder sister Qiu Tong went off for several months in the said south direction, he wanted to go out for himself and see what it was like there, having come to Pingyang city from afar himself. From what he read in the books, the climate in the south was different which led to a different lifestyle and habits compared to Pingyang city, and the variety of herbs was also naturally different. If Zhang Xiaohua could go over personally for himself, then naturally he would be able to learn more than what he could read from the books.

As the saying goes, reading thousands of books, travelling thousand li of road. Towards such a mentality, Zhang Xiaohua actually had some desire, books were indeed important tools for people to cultivate themselves.

However, the distant trip that Zhang Xiaohua was looking forward to never came, and despite several days passing, he still received no news on it and Zhang Xiaohua slowly lost any initial anticipation towards it.

On that day, Zhang Xiaohua was working in the fields as usual when he saw He Tianshu brought several people over, there were two old men with white hair at the forefront and relatively young people behind. Some looked gentle and civilized while others were muscular and brawny, but they all were like He Tianshu and had deferential attitudes towards the two men in front.

Zhang Xiaohua sighed, he had never seen squad leader He behaving like so before so he guessed that these two men were people in high positions in the pharmacy hall. Since he was not a disciple of the Piaomiao sect, there was no need for him to use such a deferential attitude to treat these men. Zhang Xiaohua bent his body and carefully dug the earth, raked the weeds, and poured his attention into the herbs at his feet.

Unfortunately, things do not go as one wishes them to. He Tianshu saw Zhang Xiaohua from afar and had no intention of sparing the boy, he led the people over to somewhere much closer where he called out, "Zhang Xiaohua, come over."

Zhang Xiaohua raised his head helplessly, carried his little hoe and walked over.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua nearing them, He Tianshu said to the boy, “Zhang Xiaohua, come over and greet hallmaster Bai and elder He from the pharmacy hall.”

Zhang Xiaohua quickly took a deep bow and said, “Greetings to hallmaster Bai, elder He.”

He Tianshu smiled and said towards the purple-faced elder, “Hallmaster Bai, this is the Zhang Xiaohua whom I have mentioned to you. He is very steady with his work and very smart as well, having read many books related to herbs.”

The two men did not reply to Zhang Xiaohua’s greeting, hallmaster Bai raised his hands and waved slightly while elder He nodded without saying anything.

He Tianshu was unsure of the two men’s opinions so he said, “Hallmaster Bai, look, Zhang Xiaohua is very studious in his pursuit of knowledge. Our hall has many collections so can you lend him some to let him widen his horizons? After all, he is working in the same fields and it will only be beneficial to us if he learns more things.”

Even before hallmaster Bai responded, a middle-aged man spoke up first, “He Tianshu, I think that you have stayed in Huanxi mountain villa for too long and forgotten the rules of our sect. How can the books in our secret books repository be shared with outsiders?”

He Tianshu smiled bitterly and replied, “I am aware of these rules, senior brother Chang, but isn’t Zhang Xiaohua a person of Huanxi mountain villa, so he would not count as an outsider right?”

Chapter 119: Long Trip

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Long trip

The senior brother Chang said, “Are people from Huanxi mountain villa the same as our Piaomiao sect members? Who told you these, He Tianshu?”

After being rebutted again and again, this point truly struck the nail on its forehead and He Tianshu had no answer to the other party’s retort.

Another slightly younger man continued, “Senior brother He, you don’t have to waste your energy, our Piaomiao sect is strict on its rules and people like use must follow them inflexibly. This junior brother is not trying to boast but among the younger generation, our aptitudes are considered better than average and would not be worse than your Zhang Xiaohua. If I have read the books in the pharmacy since young and still could not find a solution, what makes the senior brother think that he can bring a miracle to us?”

The senior brother Chang also said, “The fault of these seeds not sprouting cannot be placed entirely on you, at the most, you can continue to stay in Huanxi mountain villa for another year.”

After he finished his sentence, he laughed softly.

He Tianshu’s face turned purple from the words by the two men.

Zhang Xiaohua stood by He Tianshu and carefully pulled the corner of his shirt, he said softly, “You don’t have to help me borrow any more books, squad leader He. The villa master had given me another bunch of them.”

When hallmaster Bai heard his words, a gleam appeared in the corner of his eyes but it disappeared as soon as it came. After all, there were many youths who were more outstanding than Zhang Xiaohua in the Piaomiao sect’s

pharmacy hall, and everyone one of them was nurtured carefully since a tender age so when it came to theoretical knowledge, they were at least a hundred times better than Zhang Xiaohua. Even though he was surprised by the attitude Ou Yan had towards the boy, it was nothing major enough for him to place any attention to.

Hallmaster Bai motioned his hands and said, "You all better not argue, He Tianshu has good intentions but he was too urgent in his methods. The rules within Piaomiao sect still has to be followed, and it is not appropriate to bring the books outside of the sect. Alright, let's go take a look at the herbs."

After finishing his sentence, he took the lead and went over to the field that appeared empty.

Elder He followed closely behind as though he did not hear a single word of their argument.

Senior brother Chang and that other junior disciple looked pleased at themselves as they met He Tianshu's gaze before walking ahead to follow the two elders without sparing a single glance at Zhang Xiaohua.

He Tianshu patted Zhang Xiaohua apologetically before hurrying to follow the party.

Zhang Xiaohua did not mind them too much, he had seen his fair share of these types of gazes and had already gotten used to them. He had his own road to walk, so why bother about the looks from other people?

Following which, Zhang Xiaohua continued to work at the left area nearby while looking from afar at the group of people who seemed to be arguing quite heatedly although neither party seemed to be able to convince the other. When night finally came, the party dispersed away.

During dinner time, when Zhang Xiaohua saw He Tianshu, the latter's expression was dark and fallen.

Zhang Xiaohua sighed as he thought, bootlicking was an important skill in life.

The following days went by as usual, and nothing out of the ordinary happened during then.

On that particular night, Zhang Xiaohua was reading his collection of books as usual when He Tianshu walked in looking completely haggard and fatigued, he said, “Zhang Xiaohua, hurry and pack, you will go out with me for a trip tomorrow.”

Zhang Xiaohua was not surprised, he said, “Alright, squad leader He, why the hurry though?”

He Tianshu smiled bitterly and said, “I just got the news as well, how could I inform you earlier?”

After finishing his sentence, he walked away but after a few steps, he suddenly stopped and asked in a curious tone, “Aren’t you curious on where we are going? It seems as if you knew we were going to leave.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “When I went over to borrow more books from the villa master, she had already given me a heads up in advance so I assumed that we would be leaving earlier. Who knew that it dragged for so long, and I even thought that the trip was cancelled.”

He Tianshu smiled as he said, “So it’s like this. However, like you said, this trip will not be easy. I heard that our boss is not very agreeable but he could not overturn the villa master’s decision and finally relented.”

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows, “Boss? Who is he?”

He Tianshu said, “That is out Piaomiao sect’s sect master, haha, who is also our villa master’s elder brother.”

Zhang Xiaohua became enlightened, no wonder Huanxi mountain villa had such a close connection to Piaomiao sect, blood was thicker than water so it was natural for them to be so.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s response, He Tianshu said again, “There is much danger and bloodshed in Jianghu, and the sect master is quite protective of his younger sister so he dislikes letting her leave too far. He initially wanted our pharmacy hall’s hallmaster Bai to go but the latter had some bad blood with the person we are visiting so not just the hallmaster, but any of the men he suggested, were all unsuitable to go. Furthermore, the herbs are being grown in Huanxi mountain villa, so the villa master feels that she had not fulfilled her duty

and insisted in leaving herself. In addition, I still have something to tell you.”

After saying up to here, He Tianshu had a mysterious expression on his face.

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned, he asked, “It can’t be some secret right, squad leader He? If so, then do not say it, I still want to protect this little life of mine.”

He Tianshu scolded smilingly, “Do I look like I have news that would deliver death to you? I would like to know some as well, but I don’t have the channels or resources too.”

With a yearning expression on his face, He Tianshu said, “The villa master is a very learned person, her knowledge in all topics is very profound. Just on the subject of herbs, she is in no way inferior to our hallmaster Bai, which is one of the reasons why she is going to the south.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not know whether to laugh or cry, he said, “What kind of secret is this, I already knew it.”

He Tianshu was in disbelief as he asked, “How would you know about this? The number of people in the mountain villa who knows this is very few.”

Zhang Xiaohua picked up the book he was reading from the bed and passed it over to He Tianshu saying, “Look at this and you will understand.”

He Tianshu flipped open the books and could not help but feel dazed, he shook his head as he read while his mouth mumbled, “Awesome, unbelievable, outstanding.”

After that, he said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Brother Xiaohua, aren’t we good brothers?”

Upon seeing He Tianshu’s cajole, Zhang Xiaohua felt like ants were crawling over his body, an unsettling feeling crept up from his heart. He tested the other party, “Squad leader He, you are my teacher, how would I dare to call you my brother? Do you have something going on?”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “Let’s not talk about what master whatnot, you are my little brother today so if there is any matter, just say it to me and big brother will definitely help you. Haha.”

Zhang Xiaohua was even more certain of his suspicion, He Tianshu was like a

yellow tailed fox bowing to a chicken, he asked carefully, "In that case, what matter does elder brother He have?"

He Tianshu said sheepishly, "About this, little brother, can you lend those books to me?"

After finishing his sentence, he pointed to the dump of books placed on the table.

Zhang Xiaohua grew enlightened and his eyes rolled, he said, "There should be no problem, but it is best if you get the villa master's permission first."

He Tianshu looked slightly disappointed, but Zhang Xiaohua continued, "Aren't we going to the south together? When I carry these books along with me, we will definitely be together so you can just read from a side. When there is a chance during the trip, I will ask the villa master, and I am sure that she will agree to let an earnest student learn what he wants to."

He Tianshu felt overjoyed when he heard Zhang Xiaohua's reply, he reluctantly returned the book in his hand back to Zhang Xiaohua.

Upon seeing his response, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but feel slightly sad, so he casually took a piece of blank paper from the table and used his left hand to hold a brush and write some large characters. When He Tianshu saw it, he could not help but praised, "Not bad, this is what the scholars of our generation should do."

From the light of the next morning's sun, the words could be seen clearly on the piece of paper and they read, "No comment, do not read!"

Actually, He Tianshu had read some of the books that Ou Yan lent to Zhang Xiaohua, however, what was important to him was not the books but the notes scribbled inside. Those were the methods Ou Yan used to study, and if he could pick up the studying method Ou Yan adopted while she learnt from the books, then he would naturally be able to learn better and it would be a great boost to his standing in the pharmacy hall.

However, how would Zhang Xiaohua know all these? He only felt that the He Tianshu was pitiful, as a member of the pharmacy hall in Piaomiao sect, how would he not even have access to these books and actually came over to fight

with him over them.

After He Tianshu left, Zhang Xiaohua simply took out some of his belongings and the bundle which he got from the inner courtyard that day, and placed his things along with some of the books in the table in it. Since the trip would take several months, he believed that he would be able to finish reading all these books using that period of time.

When he saw the large bundle on his table as well as the small knapsack where his belongings are kept, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but smile to himself.

The night gradually grew deeper, and Zhang Xiaohua was lying on his bed still thinking of the instructions that He Tianshu gave before they were leaving, "About our departure tomorrow, you must not tell a single soul. In the early morning next day, I will call you and we will leave secretly together."

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand his intention, were they not just going on a trip, why must it be hushed up? It was not as if they were avoiding debt collectors.

Furthermore, he did not have any close friends in the mountain villa, so who could he possibly tell?

However, Zhang Xiaohua was ignorant that in the darkness of the night, a human figure crept secretly from the inner courtyard and to the edge of a forest, looked carefully at her surroundings, then places a small slip of paper at a certain position under a large tree before leaving.

In the early morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua woke up and practiced a round of his fist and sword martial arts before returning to his room to wait for He Tianshu's call. Not long after he returned, an azure robed little hat servant stealthily went to the forest where the lady placed the slip of paper during the previous night and took out the paper, read it carefully before frowning and keeping it into his breast, looked at his surroundings, and left carefully.

Soon after, He Tianshu went over to Zhang Xiaohua's room with a knapsack on his back and when he saw Zhang Xiaohua carrying a bundle on each of his hands, he smiled and asked, "Why are you carrying so many things? What are in those?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied innocently, "Don't you want to read the books? Haven't

I brought them out for you?”

He Tianshu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he said, “You still need not to bring that many books, how many can I possibly read?”

“But I can read them.” Zhang Xiaohua blinked as he said.

He Tianshu replied helplessly, “Alright, let’s go then.”

Even though he offered to help Zhang Xiaohua carry the larger bundle, how would Zhang Xiaohua let him do so? He Tianshu said, “If other people saw me making a small boy like you carry something so heavy, they would gossip about how inconsiderate I am. Even though we are familiar with each other, there is no need to let other people talk behind our backs.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and then passed the small knapsack on his right hand to He Tianshu, he said, “In that case, you can help me carry this, and no one will gossip behind our backs.”

He Tianshu helplessly received the knapsack and hurried Zhang Xiaohua to leave.

The two carried their belongings and head outdoors, followed a small path towards the forest and finally reached the entrance of another courtyard.

As they entered the courtyard, Zhang Xiaohua could see that it was very spacious and there were four carriages inside.

There were many people in the courtyard who were busy at work. However, when Zhang Xiaohua first entered the courtyard, his eyes were drawn to a hero standing in front of the first carriage.

The hero was taller than normal people by a head, and his body was large and wide, his clothes could not hide the rippling muscles underneath them as he stood silently like a metal edifice. Even though there were many people shuffling around, his figure stood out and grabbed everyone’s attention easily. Apart from Zhang Xiaohua, everyone’s gaze towards the hero was one of admiration and respect.

Zhang Xiaohua also noticed the same expression on He Tianshu so he carefully pulled the latter’s sleeves and asked, “Who is this? Your boss?”

He Tianshu shook his sleeves and said softly, “Zhang Xiaohua, do not trash talk anyhow. This person is strongest man in our Piaomiao sect, called Shi Niu, his external martial arts have reached a very deep level. I have heard that his single arm could carry several thousand jin of force, which is many times of what you can do.”

“Ah.... several thousand jin” Many stars appeared in Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes.

Even though they were quite close to the front, when he saw everyone leaving a healthy distance apart from Shi Niu, He Tianshu also did not go up to greet the latter.

At that moment, Qiu Tong carried a few things as she came out, and when she saw the bundle in Zhang Xiaohua’s hands, she said in anger and laughter, “Xiaohua-ah, we are not going on a vacation so why did you bring such a huge bundle? You can’t possibly be bringing the collection of books I gave you the previous time right? I remembered that it was very heavy, aren’t you afraid of tiring out the horse?”

Qiu Tong’s voice was not soft and it drew the attention of Shi Niu. When he saw Zhang Xiaohua carrying the large bundle and not seem fazed by its weight, he could not help but glanced more carefully for a second look.

When Zhang Xiaohua heard the reprimand, he replied sheepishly, “Elder sister said that she had left for a few months, so I wanted to take this opportunity to read all these books. I thought I could finish these during that period which is why I brought them over.”

Qiu Tong and Shi Niu were surprised when they heard his reply.

Qiu Tong knew how many books she passed him previously, and when she heard that he planned to finished them in a few months, she could not help but be shocked and thought secretly to herself, “Even if he reads a book every three days, he would not be able to finish them. But to finish a book in three days, how would he be able to understand its contents fully?”

When Shi Niu heard that the contents of the bundle were all books, he could estimate the weight of the bundle and could not help but he shocked. The child was only so young but he was able to carry such weight with just a single arm, while it could not be compared to himself during his youth, it was still not easy

and the difference was not large, so whose disciple was this child?

Qiu Tong continued to say, "Alright, quickly put your books at the back of the last carriage. However, you must read those books seriously, do not just flip through the pages casually or you will be letting down the villa master."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he answered, "Elder sister, please be relieved, I know my limits."

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohua followed He Tianshu to the last carriage, and the carriage was much larger than the one Zhang Xiaohua had sat on before while there were actually things like book cabinets inside so it was probably meant to store their logistics. Zhang Xiaohua opened his bundle and took some books out to place them inside, while He Tianshu threw both his and Zhang Xiaohua's knapsacks into the carriage before getting down immediately.

After Zhang Xiaohua had tidied his belongings up a little and got off the carriage, the number of people in the courtyard decreased by a lot which probably meant that it was soon to their departure. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua felt as though someone was looking at him, and when he turned his neck, he saw that the person was the burly Shi Niu. Zhang Xiaohua quickly flashed him a friendly smile and just as he was about to go over, a group of people entered from the entrance inside the courtyard out, and the person leading the part was Huanxi mountain villa's villa master Ou Yan.

Behind Ou Yan was Madam Qin and her unique-looking figure, why was it unique? Because behind her were several pretty looking young ladies dressed comfortably while bearing swords at their waist, and they looked both heroic and elegant and even though Zhang Xiaohua had not reached the age to be attracted by the opposite sex, he still would enjoy stealing a few more glances at them.

Within such a group, how could that Madam Qin not stand out?

However, putting aside Madam Qin's appearance, the bevy of ladies following behind maintained a respectful distance between the two women, and their expressions were solemn and straight.

Ou Yan walked up to Shi Niu's front, smiled and said, "Shi Niu, you have come early."

Shi Niu replied in a simply, “Morning villa master, I did not come too early, just an hour ago.”

Ou Yan continued, “Then I will have to bother you for the rest of the journey.”

Shi Niu replied, “That is of course. The sect master has instructed for your safety or I will not be allowed to drink wine when I return.”

Ou Yan smiled and looked at her surroundings before asking Qiu Tong who walked over, “Has everything been prepared?”

Qiu Tong replied softly, “Yes, young mistress, everything is prepared.”

Ou Yan nodded in satisfaction and said, “Then we shall set off now, the journey is long so we should leave earlier.”

After finishing her sentence, she got up into the first carriage with Qiu Tong’s assistance.

Following which, Madam Qin and Qiu Tong both boarded the same carriage, while the rest of the ladies sat in the second carriage, and the rest of the party occupied the last two carriages.

When everyone had boarded their respective carriages, Shi Niu got up the driver’s seat of the first carriage, picked up the whip, and called out to the horse to signal it to move while the rest of the drivers followed his lead.

Just like that, Zhang Xiaohua’s journey to the south began.

Not long after Ou Yan and the procession of carriages left, a few azure robed little hats servants applied for their leave and left Huanxi mountain villa together. When they reached Pingyang city, they all separated to their respective destinations, and among one of them went to a grocery shop. It was precisely the same man who took the slip of paper from the forest in the morning, and not long after, he exited the shop with some items he bought and disappeared into the crowd.

Hence, the news of Ou Yan leaving Huanxi mountain villa was spread secretly like that, but who could guess what the reason for their investigation was?

However, all these had nothing to do with Zhang Xiaohua.

Zhang Xiaohua sat on the carriage as he looked out at the scenery curiously.

Even though Lu town was south of Pingyang city, it was closer to the west whereas Ou Yan's destination was more towards the east. Thus, after leaving the mountain villa, the carriage did not head towards Pingyang city but went through the small roads and onto the highway that led to the east.

It was already late autumn by then and the surroundings was being affected by the chill of the weather. The crops in the fields were already harvested and many empty fields could be seen from afar, the outskirts of Pingyang city was not much different from Lu town. There were many villages in the mountains, and along the mountainous path were wild trees and plants although an occasional hut, or a herd of goats could be spotted once in a while. When looking at the familiar scenery, Zhang Xiaohua's mind naturally floated back to his own hometown, and he thought back of his parents.

It had almost been a year, were they who were far away still doing well?

Chapter 120: Toy

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Toy

Shi Niu steered the carriage expertly and crossed over several small paths before reaching the large and even highway. At that time of the day, the number of people and traffic on the road was few so Shi Niu increased his speed.

The three carriages behind were also rushing to catch up to his steed, but they naturally fell behind with the disparity in skill levels of their drivers.

Shi Niu did not seem to notice and he continued to increase the speed of the carriage he was steering while enjoying the nostalgic feeling. Fortunately, Qiu Tong was alert and she quickly stopped him, and Shi Niu apologetically explained, "It has been a while since I steered a carriage so I made a mistake. I will be slower in the future."

Shi Niu slowed down the carriage and the other carriages behind then caught up with his. Madam Qin who was in the same carriage wrinkled her brows and said, "Shi Niu, while it is good to hurry, you must always put the villa master's safety as your top priority. If you behave like this, who would be here to protect the villa master?"

Shi Niu did not seem to enjoy listening to these words, and he replied, "If we met an enemy, then how would the people behind be sufficient? Won't it still be up to us to protect her?"

Madam Qin smiled and said, "I just knew that it would be difficult speaking sense to people like you. In Jianghu, martial power is not the only type of power, one must use his head more often. As the saying goes, it is easier to dodge an open spear than a hidden arrow, so it is still best to play safe."

Shi Niu had some fear and respect towards Madam Qin so he did not refute

her words and carefully controlled the speed of the carriage so the carriages behind could catch up to his.

Not long after, the procession had left quite far from Pingyang city and there were fewer passers-by and more carriages on the highway.

There were still many fields in the distance, and a village in the wilderness would occasionally appear.

The sun was hung up high in the sky and it shone its rays onto the wide ground below; the day turned out to be another good one with nice weather.

As though he was infected by the clear weather, Shi Niu began to sing as he steered the carriage, “Little sister sits on the boat, elder brother walks on shore...”

Shi Niu’s voice went as high as his tall built and everyone in the four carriages could hear his singing, they all could not help but change their perception of the man. No one would have expected such a boorish muscular man to have such a sensitive side, and gentleness appeared in the eyes of several of the female disciples.

Unfortunately, not long after, Shi Niu revealed his ugly tail as he only knew the song, and throughout the entire journey from morning to night, he only sang the same few verses of that single song. No matter how delicious the food was, one would get tired eating it every day, not to mention those few simple lines of song lyrics?

During nightfall when it was time to check into their lodgings, everyone apart from Shi Niu almost had white spit foaming in their mouths.

For a long journey, the most important was to arrange good food and lodgings to make it comfortable, and fortunately, Qiu Tong had undertaken the journey beforehand so everyone had already planned the route that they were going to take, the rest stops, the lodgings and restaurants, so all they had to do after setting off was follow the plan during their journey.

That night, the accommodation that was planned was an inn in a small town, and even though it was only an inn, it was much better than the places that Zhang Xiaohua had previously stayed when he journeyed.

The people from the Huanxi mountain villa rented out the only courtyard in the inn which made the fat owner of the inn smile until his eyes formed two slits on his face. Everyone was busy at the front and back in fear of offending such an important guest.

Unfortunately, after the people from the mountain villa entered the courtyard, two disciples stood guard at the entrance of the courtyard and prevented outside people from entering; even the owner of the inn was barred from the accommodation and the food was all purchased from specialized stores in the town. This led the owner to feel heartache as he had lost an important source of income; however, when he thought about it, the silvers paid by his guests far exceeded his own published rent so he immediately extinguished his unhappy thoughts.

Even though it was night-time, the mountain villa people were still capable enough to purchase many ingredients or the chef whom they brought along to use, and not long later, two to three tables of food was prepared and ready to be eaten. Zhang Xiaohua was not a servant but he also could not sit on the same table as He Tianshu, Ou Yan and the others, so he ate a simple meal with the rest of the people in the small room.

After dinner, the courtyard was lit up with lanterns; the courtyard was actually not small and there were many rooms, Zhang Xiaohua could actually stay in the same room with He Tianshu by themselves. After Zhang Xiaohu lit the light and was prepared to read his book, He Tianshu stopped him and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, would you like to go out for a while with me?"

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he replied, "It is already so late, why are you going out instead of turning in earlier?"

He Tianshu smiled and said, "There is naturally a reason for so, do you want to come along?"

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows and suddenly thought of Ma Jing, could this squad leader He have the same hobby as him?

Zhang Xiaohua persuaded the other party, "Squad leader He, it has already been a day so aren't you tired? It is best to rest early, and I've heard that such places are unclean so it is best to not frequent them."

He Tianshu was surprised but broke out into laughter later. He pressed his knuckle onto Zhang Xiaohua's head and said, "You little rascal, you still know quite a lot about the world. Everyone says that scholars are knowledgeable and it is indeed true, the previous Zhang Xiaohua who did not know how to read would not have known about this."

Zhang Xiaohua rubbed his head and said in a wronged tone, "So what if I know, it is better than you going over there."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "Where do you want to go, I just thought that the night was not too late, and as the saying goes, the fist does not leave the hands like the songs do not leave the mouth, have you trained your fist martial arts yet today? Surely we can head out to warm our muscles?"

Zhang Xiaohua then understood He Tianshu's intention and he said apologetically, "I rather not go, it is already so late now. I rather sleep early instead."

He Tianshu said, "Zhang Xiaohua, when talking about the time to practice martial art, you may not know this but the best time to train is actually deep in the night when Yin and Yang energy alternates. Even though you do not train in inner energy cultivation methods, normal fist martial arts will also enjoy some benefits from training at this hour. Forget it if you do not want to go."

Zhang Xiaohua hesitated for a moment before saying, "Squad leader He, I always sleep early and never seem to be able to stay awake past midnight. Fine, I will follow you to train since I did not practice in the afternoon and evening today."

Hence, He Tianshu led Zhang Xiaohua out where several disciples were on guard, He Tianshu spoke to them before leaving the small courtyard.

They met the fat inn owner after exiting the courtyard who upon seeing someone exit from the small courtyard, went over with a wide grin on his face to welcome the visitors. When he heard that He Tianshu was looking for a place with a forest, he became surprised and pondered for a long while before pointing here and there to some vague location and even suggested calling an attendant to bring them over instead.

He Tianshu naturally did not want to be followed, he rejected the inn owner's

kind intentions and brought Zhang Xiaohua as they left the inn. Zhang Xiaohua could not remember the way and was not able to understand the inn owner's directions, but he felt relieved since He Tianshu was leading the way.

However, not long after, Zhang Xiaohua felt that something was wrong and every time He Tianshu reached a junction, the latter would ponder for a moment before continuing to walk. Zhang Xiaohua began to suspect if He Tianshu was lost.

Indeed, after passing several streets, He Tianshu paused in his footsteps and turned around to ask Zhang Xiaohua, "Are we walking in the right direction?"

Zhang Xiaohua rolled his eyes and said, "It has always been you leading the way, how would I know if we are walking in the right direction or not. Furthermore, I am a natural born directions idiot who can't even remember the way from the mountain villa entrance to the courtyard, not to mention this foreign environment."

He Tianshu smiled bitterly and said, "It seems that we have to ask for directions now."

However, there were very few passers-by in the middle of the night, and who knew where He Tianshu had walked to, the place was pitch black darkness so where could he find someone to ask directions from?

He Tianshu looked at his surroundings and pointed to a lantern in front, he said, "Let's go there, perhaps there will be someone to ask directions from. If not, we can return to the inn."

Zhang Xiaohua naturally had no objections as he followed He Tianshu towards the lantern.

By the time they walked into the light, they realized that it was actually a small weapon store. He Tianshu felt strange in his heart since the store was still open so late in the night.

As He Tianshu walked into the store, although it was not completely pitch dark, there was only a lit lantern so he could not see his surroundings clearly. However, he could smell the odour of alcohol the moment he entered, and upon a closer inspection, he saw a man dressed like a blacksmith sleeping at the

counter.

There were many swords and blades on display in the store which were probably made by this blacksmith. He Tianshu did not hurry to wake the other party up, he picked up a wide blade and looked at it in interest. This was not strange actually, a scholar would enter a bookshop if he passes by one on the streets, and even if he did not purchase anything, he would at least flip through some of the books. A martial artist was no different in a weapon store, he would pick up a few weapons to admire even if they were not suitable for him. This was probably a common trait of all people no matter their occupation.

However, when He Tianshu examined the blade in his hands, his expression turned slightly more serious as he did not expect the small store to produce such good quality weapons.

Thus, He Tianshu began to browse the weapons seriously to see if he could find a better weapon for himself.

Zhang Xiaohua did not have any interests in these things but the streets were chilly compared to the interior of the store which at least had snoring sounds and another person inside. Thus, he also began to look around.

He Tianshu used a sword so he naturally looked for a steel sword.

Thus, he went to a shelf and picked one up after another but had no better find. If one was to talk about quality of the sword material, they were not bad but still slightly worse than the sword He Tianshu currently owned so he would be hard pressed to spend money on another one of those he found. When he walked to the end, he saw a dagger-like weapon placed on the shelf which was black in dull. It was unusual so he walked over and bent his waist to pick it up, the dagger felt cold to touch and was heavy for its size, and when He Tianshu brought it up to his eye level, he could tell that it was not an ordinary dagger.

Rather than a dagger, it was more appropriate to call it a small sword. A normal dagger usually had a wooden handle and a sharp blade on its other end, but this dagger was like a precious sword because its handle and blade was made from the same metallic material. However, the length proportion of the handle and blade was slightly off, the length of its cutting blade was shorter than usual. He Tianshu carefully used his fingers to feel the edge of the sword, he could not

help but wrinkle his brows, what kind of item was this?

A child's toy?

He raised his head and just as he was about to wake the storekeeper, he saw Zhang Xiaohua turning round and round in boredom, and then looked back at the little sword in his hands. He called out, "Zhang Xiaohua, come over for a while, I have something fun to show you."

Zhang Xiaohua called out in agreement and went over to see the item which He Tianshu was showing to him, he asked in a curious tone, "Squad leader He, what is this item? It looks like a toy sword? However, it is not much bigger than the ones I played with when I was young."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "I think the blacksmith made it for fun, you can take it and try it out. I will buy it for you if you like it."

Zhang Xiaohua did not accept the sword and said, "I am not a child, buy me a real sword if you want to buy me a weapon."

He Tianshu said, "How can you use a real sword if you do not know any sword martial art. Furthermore..."

When he said up to here, He Tianshu suddenly stopped because what he wanted to say was, can your hands even hold a real sword? However, he felt that these words would hurt the boy's feelings so he quickly stopped midway in his sentence.

Zhang Xiaohua was confused and he asked, "Furthermore?"

He Tianshu quickly tried to find something else, he said, "Furthermore, I do not know how expensive this precious sword is so I am still considering if I should buy it for you."

Zhang Xiaohua snorted and turned around, he said, "I rather not have this toy."

However, when he turned around, he accidentally bumped into a precious sword and with a "Dang" sound, the sword dropped onto the floor with a loud clash.

Upon hearing the sound, the sleeping blacksmith woke up and shouted, "Catch

the thief.....”

When he saw He Tianshu who was holding the small sword and Zhang Xiaohua, he quickly wiped the drool off his mouth and smiled as he walked over, saying, “My apologies, customers. Have you found anything you like? I was dreaming just now, really sorry about that.”

Zhang Xiaohua bent his waist and used his left hand to pick up the precious sword on the floor, he gripped it in his hands and said, “If you did not wake up, we would have really taken this weapon and gone off.”

The blacksmith smiled and said, “Seeing the heroic air on the two of you, how could you be such people? Please do not joke like that.”

From the dim light in the store, the blacksmith sight was pretty amazing to tell that his customers were not the ordinary ones he usually entertained.

The blacksmith looked at the little sword in He Tianshu’s hands and said, “This customer really has a good eye, this is the most precious item in my store, it has been passed down for a hundred years and had been caught in your eye today, perhaps my heart will have to be torn.”

He Tianshu smiled widely as he used his fingers to wipe of the layer of dust on the small blade and said, “This is the precious item of your store? Why don’t you have something to cover it at least? Furthermore, what is this weapon good for? Is it a dagger? Why is its blade so blunt? Is it a sword? Why is it so small?”

The blacksmith was questioned until he became speechless, he sheepishly said, “Alright, I will tell you the truth. A hundred years ago when my grandfather’s grandfather was still alive, an old man with white hair came into our store and said that this was an immortal treasure. If you don’t believe me, you can try weighing the thing, how could normal metal be so heavy?”

He Tianshu continued to smile as he said, “I feel strange, why would the person not go to a pawnshop if he wanted to pawn an item, why would he come over to your store instead. forget it, I was actually planning on buying a precious sword but I guess I should save myself the trouble.” While he spoke, He Tianshu placed the small sword back on its shelf and prepared to walk out.

The blacksmith immediately became flustered and he said, “Alright, customer,

you are really good. I will be honest with you; this is a toy I brought back from the village. I was planning on melting and recasting it as a weapon since it was quite dense, but it would not melt for some reason so I left it there as a toy for children to play with. However, it was too heavy so no children would take a liking towards it, and it has been left there for many years instead. Customer, you can take a look around at the other weapons, and if you buy more things, I will gift this toy to you as well, alright?”

He Tianshu pursed his lips and said, “I still have to buy more things? From how remote your shop is, how many customers can you possibly have? Furthermore, I am only one person so how many swords am I able to buy? However, your workmanship is pretty good so I will look around first.”

After finishing his sentence, he casually passed the little sword to Zhang Xiaohua who received it with his right hand as his left hand was still holding on to the precious sword. Indeed, the sword was quite heavy, so no wonder no child was interested in playing with it. He then passed the precious sword in his left hand to He Tianshu.

When He Tianshu received the precious sword from Zhang Xiaohua, he inspected it and said, “This sword is pretty good, shopkeeper, how much is it?”

Upon seeing He Tianshu’s interest, the blacksmith said, “Customer has such a good eye, this weapon is our store’s...” When he spoke up to here, he quickly changed his tone when He Tianshu wrinkled his brows and apologized, “Oh, I am sorry. This sword is made by my grandfather so it has been here for quite many years, your eyes are pretty sharp to have caught it. No discounts, this cost twenty silvers.”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “Was your grandfather Ou Yezi?”

The blacksmith was surprised and he said. “Of course not.”

He Tianshu continued, “If he was Ou Yezi, I would pay two thousand silvers, not to mention twenty silvers. If not, this price is simply too high.”

The blacksmith asked, “In that case, how much does this customer think it is worth?”

He Tianshu replied, “Two silvers are enough.”

The blacksmith said angrily, "Isn't this daylight robbery? You don't have a shred of sincerity."

After saying that, he tried to take the sword back.

He Tianshu did not budge and let the other party take back the sword. However, the blacksmith did not take it back, he said, "If customer is slightly more sincere, could he please consider increasing the amount?"

Zhang Xiaohua was bored as he watched the two men bargained, so he turned his attention onto the small sword in his hands.

Even though the small sword was covered in a layer of dust, it was still obviously black and slightly reflective. Zhang Xiaohua felt strange, he used his left palm to wipe off the dust on it.

However, when his left hand came into contact with the little sword, he suddenly felt a weird sensation as though the little sword had a connection with his left hand, but the feeling disappeared as soon as he moved his left hand away.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua switched his grip to his left hand and when it entered his left grip, he felt a connection as though the little sword had become part of his left hand. However, when he used his right hand to wipe of the dust and inspected it carefully, he made no other discovery about it, except that the black surface was not reflective although some brilliance can be seen coming from within the small sword. However, he could not be sure if it was due to the light from the oil lamp.

Nevertheless, no matter what use the small sword had, whether as a toy or as a dagger, Zhang Xiaohua made his mind up to possess it.

At that moment, the blacksmith and He Tianshu had finally reached the last stage of their negotiations. He Tianshu said, "Alright, let's not argue any further. We shall both take a step back and call it at seven silvers."

Chapter 121: Small sword

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Small sword

The blacksmith seemed to have found a lifeline and his face became full of joy as he said, "Alright, brother, since you are so cool about it, I will have to part with it reluctantly and make a friend from you through this exchange. Seven silvers? So be it, and don't forget to come more often to this little store."

He Tianshu smiled and said, "That is natural, I have a bunch of brothers back where I came from. If they liked the sword, I will definitely drag them over here, but this boss will have to show me some grace during then."

The blacksmith also smiled as he replied, "No problem, two encounters are enough to make us close friends. If you become a repeat customer, I will naturally give you some benefits in return."

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua pulled on the edges of He Tianshu's short, He Tianshu turned back and saw Zhang Xiaohua holding on to the small sword so he said to the blacksmith, "About this small sword, since my little brother is interested in it, how about you give it to him as a toy?"

The blacksmith had no reservations as he waved his hands and said, "No problem, haven't I said it earlier? Just treat this toy as a gift to this little brother, and you can bring more customers over to my store another time instead."

Everyone was thus happy, He Tianshu handed over the silvers and asked for directions back to the inn before leading Zhang Xiaohua out of the weapon store.

He Tianshu was in a good mood as he walked back, he had managed to obtain a rather decent sword at a very reasonable price which was much more rewarding than going to the forest to practice his martial arts. It seemed that he

had to go out and explore more often in the future.

Zhang Xiaohua was also happy, he gripped onto the small sword with his left hand and waved it around continuously. It felt as though his arm had suddenly grown longer, but he did not notice that it had gotten really late and there was no one else on the streets. While he was walking, Zhang Xiaohua suddenly felt a wave of drowsiness and his eyes could not help but close themselves before he lay down on the ground with the small sword still firmly clutched in his left hands.

He Tianshu was even funnier, he would stare at his previous sword lovingly without straying his eyes elsewhere, and only after a while later did he realized that he could not hear Zhang Xiaohua's footsteps. When he turned around to look, he could no longer find the boy.

He Tianshu could not help but feel a wave of anxiety run across him, cold sweat poured from his forehead, from where did an expert came from and kidnapped the boy without him even noticing anything at all? Could there be such an expert in Jianghu?

When He Tianshu put the sword aside and looked around, he saw Zhang Xiaohua lying down on the ground motionlessly from afar and felt even more worried. He prepared his heart for the worst, and upon checking that there was nobody around, he made his way over in a few steps with bitterness overcoming his heart. This boy was still alright not long ago, how did he end up like this in a blink of an eye, and how could he account this accident to his elder brother?

When He Tianshu reached the boy, he observed carefully but could not find any injuries on his body, so he thought, "Is this the legendary punching through the air? Could someone die from a punch?"

Just as he was feeling anxious, a familiar sound came out from Zhang Xiaohua's nose. He Tianshu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he had worried himself close to death but the boy was only sleeping!

However, when He Tianshu went over and kicked Zhang Xiaohua a few times, he became frustrated as the boy did not wake up no matter how much he kicked, must he really carry the boy back himself?

In the early morning of the next day, the sun rose as usual from the east and

Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes immediately. Looking at his unfamiliar surroundings, he then recalled that he was no longer in his own familiar room.

He then discovered that his left hand was still clutching on tightly to an object, and when he picked it up, he realized that it was a small toy sword. Zhang Xiaohua then recalled the events of the previous night although he was unsure how he came back, wasn't it strange?

When he saw He Tianshu who was still sleeping soundly on the bed opposite of his, Zhang Xiaohua stealthily got up with the small sword still in his hands.

As he walked out of the room, the sky had already turned bright but it was still early so nobody was awake yet. Only the two Piaomiao disciples were standing guard at their respective corners, and when they saw Zhang Xiaohua exited the room, they ignored him and continued to inspect the surroundings.

When Zhang Xiaohua walked to the middle of the courtyard, he studied the small sword in his hands. Under the dim light of the store, he did not get a good look at it and now that he did, he realized that it was only a toy. The sword's length was not long and was probably about four to five cun, and two thumbs wide. The sword handle was very small although it fitted well in Zhang Xiaohua's grip. The entire sword was dull and black like some metal, and was cool to the touch despite the long time it had been in Zhang Xiaohua's hands. Even though the material was opaque, Zhang Xiaohua could feel as though there was a pulse inside, and the edge could not be used as Zhang Xiaohua felt its bluntness. If not for its weight, Zhang Xiaohua would really think that it was a toy for children.

Zhang Xiaohua's strength in his left hand was so strong that he could ignore the weight of the small sword. He casually waved it about and it felt comfortable to use, so he developed a liking towards it and could not help but think, if he used it to train his sword martial arts, would it produce better results than his usual tree branch?

When he thought back to sword martial arts, Zhang Xiaohua felt an itch gnawing in his heart; the last time he trained was early morning of the previous day, he had skipped his afternoon and evening training and now that he had a toy that was stronger than a tree branch, he would naturally want to test it out.

Actually, the space in the courtyard was rather large and it was more than

sufficient for Zhang Xiaohua to practice his fist or sword martial art. However, how would Zhang Xiaohua let anybody see his own secret fist martial arts? Hence, he decided to leave the courtyard.

The inn was situated at the end of the street, and there was a small river and bridge beside it. Zhang Xiaohua walked to the river bank and looked down to the river until he found a pond at the back of the inn. The pond was not unlike the one behind Zhang Xiaohua's house in Guo village, it also had a bamboo forest nearby. Zhang Xiaohua's eyes brightened as he walked over to the bamboo forest.

Indeed, just as Zhang Xiaohua had expected, there was an empty space within the bamboos and since there was no one else who should pass by, Zhang Xiaohua began to perform the stances and practiced the dipper heavenly fist nine times to allow the energy flow which was noticeable thicker rush through his body.

Next, Zhang Xiaohua looked carefully again at his surroundings and after ensuring that there was no one around, he picked up his small sword and practiced the sixteen variations of the sword stance. While it was uncertain if due to the change in weapon or Zhang Xiaohua's mood, but the different variations felt more fluid than before and that nameless warm energy flowed smoothly from his shoulder into Zhang Xiaohua's left hand. However, it did not dissipate though Zhang Xiaohua's left hand like before, instead, all of the energy flowed into the small sword in Zhang Xiaohua's hand and the small sword gradually gave out a dull coloured light that was very faint and barely noticeable.

After Zhang Xiaohua practiced all the variations, his sword martial arts became more exited and like that particular night, he thrust his sword towards a particularly thick bamboo. Actually, in Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts, since he was able to use a tree branch to pierce a small hole through a tree, even though bamboo was hollow inside, its exterior was much stronger than tree bark so based on the sharpness of this small sword, he would be satisfied if he could punch a small hole though the bamboo. However, the result widely exceeded Zhang Xiaohua's expectations, the bamboo shell broke off like a piece of paper and the small sword felt no resistance as it cut though the bamboo and pierced through another one at the back.

Zhang Xiaohua was greatly surprised, he quickly retracted his small sword and was still in disbelief that he had cut down the bamboo. However, the hole was still on the bamboo so he could not avoid the truth. Hence, he felt the bamboo with his hands to check that there was nothing wrong with it, and indeed, it was tough, so he directed his attention back to the small sword in his left hand.

When did he become so powerful?

While elder Yu was awesome when he used his longsword to pierce through the tree, he could use this baton-like blunt small sword to pierce through an even tougher bamboo, and even though it was not as good as elder Yu, it was still far, far... far more powerful than other people? Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to believe so, after all, he had not seen anyone else trained in their sword so he could not tell how powerful the sword martial art should be. At the very least, he knew that he had exceeded his own expectations.

At that moment, there was noise coming from outside the bamboo forest so Zhang Xiaohua quickly came out. This was not the mountain villa, and looking at the time, perhaps the people from the mountain villa had already packed and were rearing to go.

By the time Zhang Xiaohua ran over to the inn, most of the people had already eaten their breakfast and were preparing to pack up. He Tianshu wrinkled his brows as he stood in his spot, and upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua returned, the wrinkle smoothed and he asked in a slightly frustrated tone, "Zhang Xiaohua, where did you go so early in the morning? Causing everyone to wait for you."

Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly apologized, he said, "Squad leader He, didn't you say yesterday that song cannot leave the mouth and fist cannot leave the hands? Thus, I went out to practice my martial arts in the morning."

He Tianshu saw the small sword in his hands and he felt funny in his heart, he could guess the mind of a child who just received a toy so the boy must have gone out to play with it. Hence, he said solemnly, "While practicing your martial arts is a good thing, one must only do so at the appropriate juncture, we are currently out on a trip so we have to be careful and not pull any stunts. This toy is best kept within your breast, do not keep holding it around in your left hand and be the butt of other people's jokes. Hurry and finish your breakfast, the villa

master had eaten hers a while ago and is ready to set off soon.”

Zhang Xiaohua kept this small sword into his breast as instructed and rushed over to eat his breakfast before packing his things simply and getting on the carriage.

As the four carriages gradually disappeared into the distance, the fat inn keeper stood reluctantly at his spot as he thought, what great guests, they stayed for a night without requiring meals to be provided, and even gave so much money after that. If there were more of such customers in the future, it would even be hard for him not to get rich.

The innkeeper initially thought that he had to bury such a good memory in his heart to savour again some other time, but even before the noon came, a hero in silk robes rode a handsome horse over to ask about the whereabouts of his previous guests while not hesitating to show that he was willing to reward the former generously for any information. The fat innkeeper could not help but recount every single details of his beautiful memory of the day before.

After the silk robed man left, the fat innkeeper once again sighed in exclamation of what good fortune he had, his previous guests even brought in more wealth after they left, he truly had to thank the heavens.

The people from Huanxi mountain villa were naturally unaware of this events as they continued to rush towards their destination.

However, that day was no longer as fresh as the previous one, even Zhang Xiaohua who had little experience travelling outside was no longer as interested in the scenery as before. After leaving Pingyang city, the scenery that greeted them were not much different anymore so after seeing them enough, one would naturally get sick of it.

Furthermore, the steel-like Shi Niu indeed had a strong constitution, despite singing the whole of the previous day, his voice was still loud and clear as he sang the same few lines again and again. Initially, the rest thought that the former had drunk much wine the night before and would not be in good condition to sing again so they rejoiced secretly, but now they realized that they had to intoxicate him even more so that he would lose his voice. Although the song he sang sounded nice, if they were to listen to it every day, would they endure the

remaining journey?

Zhang Xiaohua and He Tianshu were sitting in the third carriage with a number of disciples by their side chatting idly. Zhang Xiaohua was not paying attention to the chatter, his left hand was continuously playing with the small sword while his right hand held a book which he was reading engrossedly,

Zhang Xiaohua's right hand did not recover fully, and even though it looked the same as when he first returned to Huanxi mountain villa, he could feel that it was unlike how elder Yu said where his bones and meridians were shattered by inner energy and unable to completely recover. Zhang Xiaohua could sense a noticeable improvement in his hand, moreover, he would always practice using it whether intentionally or not so he had faith that it would completely recover one day and give everyone a big surprise.

He Tianshu was sitting in the innermost interior of the carriage, closing his eyes in deep thought, his hand was also holding on to a book as though he was solving some question in his head. Not long after, a smile appeared on his face as he opened his eyes. He looked at the scenery outside the window and wrinkled his brows, even though the carriage was of some distance from the first one, he could still hear Shi Niu's singing clearly from his position.

When his gaze fell on Zhang Xiaohua, it inevitably contained some happiness as he looked at the small sword in Zhang Xiaohua's left hand. He smiled and said, "Zhang Xiaohua, this toy is pretty good right, you seem to like it a lot."

Upon hearing his words, Zhang Xiaohua put the book down, looked at the small sword, and replied sincerely, "I do, squad leader He, I really like this small sword, thanks you for giving it to me."

He Tianshu waved his hands and said, "I didn't spend a single cent on it, it came as a free gift which I had no use for so I would naturally give it to you to play with. Luckily there is no sharp edge or you might hurt yourself."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Don't you already have a precious sword? I could see that you already own a sword, so why did you buy another one?"

He Tianshu smiled as he replied, "The original sword of mine is not any particularly special weapon, it is a normal low grade item which I was planning to switch out of sooner or later. When I saw that the workmanship in the shop was

pretty good and would sell for at least fifteen silvers in Pingyang city, I had to get it for just seven silvers from over there. Furthermore, the store owner even had a free gift with the sword, and although it is only a toy, that still made me happy, so you do not have to thank me especially.”

However, he did not know that in that faraway town where he had just left from, the blacksmith strode proudly on the streets to the butcher place, generously threw some coins over to butcher and said, “Old sixth, this is the money I borrowed from you a few days ago and some to buy some meat. Hurry up, I still have to go the wine shop later.”

The butcher asked in a puzzled voice, “Old Tie, why are you so generous today? Did you make a sale?”

The blacksmith said proudly, “An idiot from who knows where came over to my store and bought a steel sword for seven silvers, you say if I have struck rich or not?”

The butcher swallowed his tongue and said, “What a poor fool, you tried to sell it at two to three silvers usually but no one would buy, and yet you actually sold it at such a good price in the end.”

Then, without any delay, he nimbly prepared the meat for the blacksmith.

The blacksmith suddenly seemed to recall something so he said again, “Oh right, about the toy your third child picked up from the mountain a few years back, I gave it to that customer as a present. I have told you before, if someone bought it. I would pass the money to you, and if I gave it away as a free gift, I would owe you five cents.”

The butcher replied in an unhappy tone, “The customer must have purchased your sword at that price because of my toy, how can you reimburse me five coppers just like that?”

The blacksmith got pissed off, saying, “That toy of yours was picked up for free and nobody bothered to look at it for three years in my store. If you do not want the five cents, I will chase the person down for the toy and return it back to you.”

The butcher smiled apologetically and said, “But five cents is still too little, why

not add a little more in?”

The blacksmith mock scolded, “I knew that you would say that. Here’s ten cents, just take it remuneration for your third child’s effort to climb the hill.”

After fishing his sentence, he fished out a copper and passed it to the butcher.

The butcher took the money in lightning speed and smiled, “Since we picked it up, this money is still better than nothing. If my third child picks more things up, I will pass it to you to sell in the future.”

The blacksmith waved his hands and said, “Don’t bother, just find a pawnshop instead. That toy had been in my shop for three years, I don’t want to waste my effort on such unproductive things. Just give me my meat now, I still plan to go to the wine shop. Today’s weather is just right to get drunk, haha.”

The blacksmith then took the meat and left hurriedly while the butcher continued on with his business.

As for Zhang Xiaohua, he did not know that his favourite small sword was only worth five coppers.

Zhang Xiaohua still felt immense gratitude to He Tianshu, he said, “Squad leader He, I won’t say anymore words of gratitude, but if you ever need any help, do not hesitate to ask me in the future.”

He Tianshu laughed and picked up the book in his hands to read, while Zhang Xiaohua got his signal and giggled without saying anything further.

A while later, He Tianshu asked again, “Zhang Xiaohua, how did you fell asleep in the streets last night?”

Zhang Xiaohua asked in a puzzled tone, “I did that? Squad leader He, I was actually planning to ask you as well. When I woke up this morning, I only recalled the events in the weapon store and everything afterwards was a complete blank, so it seems that I had fallen asleep on the streets.”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “About that, you were initially walking behind me when I suddenly realized your disappearance. It gave me a fright and when I turned back to look for you, I found you lying on the ground fast asleep, you don’t remember any of that?”

Zhang Xiaohua said apologetically, “I really am unaware, squad leader He. My elder brothers said that I could not wake up no matter how hard they call me to, but they never said that I would fall asleep so suddenly and I have never gone out so late in the night before.”

He Tianshu wrinkled his eyebrows and said, “Then this will be a problem, who knows if you would sleep like this every day, because it will be quite troublesome if so.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “Why is it troublesome?”

He Tianshu explained, “The middle of the night is when Ying and Yang energy intersects so many inner energy cultivation methods have to be practiced at such a time. If your sleeping habits are like this, how can you learn any of these inner energy cultivation methods?”

Zhang Xiaohua felt worried so he asked, “Ya, so what can I do?”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “There is no need to worry because not all inner energy cultivation methods have such a requirement. We can discuss it again if you have the chance in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohu felt that his words were reasonable so he did not pursue any further.

Chapter 122: Robbery on the road

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Robbery on the road

The days spent travelling were bland and tedious. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua had low expectations, he would not care if he was in the horse carriage or at his own room as long as he could read his books every day.

In fact, since he did not have to work in the fields, he had more time to read than usual.

The journey on horse carriage went on like this for another ten plus days, and Shi Niu's singing voice persisted throughout the entire period as well. Everyone was initially in admiration, but it turned into hate before reaching a critical point when villa master Ou had to intervene in the situation herself. Under her orders, Shi Niu stopped singing for that period of half a day, but as soon as half the day passed Shi Niu would not be able to contain his joy upon seeing the beautiful sunset in the horizon and stretch his vocal cords again, causing Ou Yan to not know whether she should laugh or cry. With Madam Qin's comforting words, she slowly calmed down, and as for the rest of the fellow passengers in the carriages behind, they simply treated it as a noisy human sized crow cawing.

In the beginning few days after their accommodation had been settled in the night, Zhang Xiaohua would drag He Tianshu to find a place to train, but He Tianshu seemed to have learnt his lesson from the first night and would find ways to reject the boy. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua had no choice but to practice his martial arts alone, but a few days later, he became curious and asked He Tianshu secretly in the carriage for his reason.

He Tianshu smiled mysteriously and asked Zhang Xiaohua if he had seen other disciples going out or staying at the courtyard to practice their martial arts as

well. Zhang Xiaohua thought back carefully and realized indeed that he had not seen any of them practiced their martial arts yet.

He Tianshu then explained the reason. It seemed that He Tianshu was like the other disciples, they were practicing their inner energy. As the saying goes, external martial arts is trained through the tendons, bones and skin while internal martial arts trains with a breath. This inner energy cultivation only requires the practitioner to sit down and accumulate qi, whereas fist martial art practice trains the external body. Actually, all the disciples in Huanxi mountain villa were like that, they would practice their fist martial arts in the morning and evening and cultivate their inner energy at night. The reason for practicing fist martial art was to train their bodies, and secondly to familiarize themselves with the martial arts movements. Since they were travelling now, training in their inner energy cultivation methods would naturally take precedence over their fist martial arts practice.

Furthermore, according to He Tianshu, inner energy cultivation can replace sleeping at night after it reaches a certain level of cultivation, so one would only need to sit down for a few hours at night instead. Upon hearing all these, Zhang Xiaohua felt a huge wave of jealousy; if he did not have to sleep just for sitting for a while, then how interesting his life would be. However, when he thought back to how his body must sleep after a certain hour and would not wake up no matter how he was called, his heart could not help but feel regret.

While the Piaomiao disciples need not practice their fist martial arts in the morning or night, Zhang Xiaohua was not the same. He did not know any inner energy cultivation methods so he had no choice but to look for a place to train his martial arts, and because he did not want other people to watch him train, every time the party reached a new location at night, the first thing he would do after dinner was to find a hidden spot where he could practice his fist martial arts.

And ever since Zhang Xiaohua obtained the small toy sword, his sword martial arts saw large improvements. The sixteen variations were now imprinted into his body and he could perform any of them at a mere thought, and the angle and speed of his thrusts also became sharper and quicker. The small sword was nimble like an extension of his arm, and the warm flow also increased in

thickness by much, and the overall power of his strikes vastly exceeded Zhang Xiaohua's expectations. Ever since one time he practiced his sword martial arts during the trip and bore a hole straight through a thick tree, Zhang Xiaohua no longer dared to use his full power to strike any object in fear of falling the tree and causing the inn to demand for compensation.

However, Zhang Xiaohua's worries disappeared before long as the southern part of the journey was not all on highways. After a few days later, they soon reached the muddy and mountainous paths and the inns that they stayed in were all small ones in little towns. Sometimes, they even had to put up their own tentages and build their own lodgings in the wilderness.

On that particular day, Shi Niu was still steering the first carriage when he reached the front of a mountain. The mountain was not high but there was only a single narrow path that curved up the mountain, and there were many shrubs and trees in the forest, so one was not able to see far ahead with a single glance.

Shi Niu immediately stopped the carriage, turned around and asked, "Lady Qiu Tong, how did you pass this place the previous time? The mountain looks dangerous, and if the road is blocked, we will have to turn back instead."

Qiu Tong looked at the mountain, wrinkled her brows and said, "I had to cross through the mountain the previous time as well, and there was not much danger. There seemed to be a path ahead from the bottom but it deviates quite far, and when I asked the guide, he said that it would take around a day's worth of time. Since I was in a hurry the previous time, I took the bypass channel."

Madam Qin pondered for a moment and said, "Since the villa master is travelling on carriage this time, it is better not to risk and take the dangerous route. Looking at the mountain shape, if there are any obstructions on the path, we have an abundance of highly skilled experts who can move the stones away so the road should still be passable."

Ou Yan disagreed, she felt that it was not wise to take the longer route for safety reasons.

Madam Qin said, "It is at most an additional day worth of journey, and since our trip to Rejuvenation valley is not a short trip, the additional time would not make much difference. Furthermore, your seeds will not sprout in the winter

anyway so why is there a need to rush just to save a day's worth of time?"

The other passengers in the carriage all agreed, and since Ou Yan was an easy-going person, she did not persist in her opinion and under the persuasion of everyone, she relented.

After travelling inside the mountain and forest path for a while, several men in black fitted clothes appeared and watched the carriage from afar, they made some hand signals and activated their qinggong to climb up the mountain.

The passengers in the carriage were still unaware that they have avoided a calamity by playing safe and they continued down their path.

On the second day, the party managed to cross the mountains and returned back to the pre-planned path.

The following road was still not on the highway, it passed straight through the mountains and forests although the path was not as dangerous as the one they had went past. However, Shi Niu, Madam Qin and the other disciples still kept their guards up at all times in watch for any unexpected events.

Unfortunately, life does not go how the way we want it to be. On that particular day just before they entered a path for forest, although there was a saying in Jianghu "do not enter where there is a forest", the trees were not dense and the leaves have shed by quite a bit. A cold wind was blowing and it seemed to not be dangerous so everyone let down their guards.

Just as Shi Niu was singing his song as he rode through the forest, a "whoosh" sound flew by and an arrow suddenly shot from the trees about ten zhang away in front of the carriage.

The arrow which appeared out of nowhere broke Shi Niu's song, he immediately took a deep breath of cold air and called out "Yu....." before pulling the reins of the horse and forcing the carriage to stop. The passengers in the carriage were chatting idly when this happened, and they immediately quietened down while the other people at the carriages behind who were with Zhang Xiaohua were also surprised by the sudden change of events, and many disciples hopped off their carriages and pulled out their weapons to prepare for any battle ahead.

Just as everyone was feeling anxious, a person appeared on horseback from the forest, his figure was tall and large and his clothes were simple. He held a spear in one arm and sat on an unimpressive horse which tottered over to the party slowly. When he got near, everyone could see that he had a square face which was slightly bony, his eyes were lively and were focused on the four carriages.

He stopped when he walked to the front of the arrow, and used both hands to raise the spear. Everyone was surprised, they thought, "He could not be thinking of charging towards us just by himself right?" Subconsciously, everyone gripped their weapons tighter but a moment later, they heard the person shout aloud in a tone even louder than Shi Niu, "This mountain is ours, these trees are ours, you will have to pay a toll if you want to pass here."

The voice was loud and crisp causing several birds to fly from their roost, but the only thing was, all the passengers were secretly amused at the situation as they looked at the single person who was blocking their way as though they were looking at a fool saying a joke as though it was real.

The person who shouted saw that nobody was responding, and the large hero who was steering the first carriage did not have any change in his expression as he stared coldly back at himself and could not help but flare up, "What are you looking, weren't you singing just now? What rubbish you were spouting, it was so unbearable to listen to, causing pollution to my ears. Hurry and bring your money and I'll let you go or else..." He then brandished the spear on his hands in the air to demonstrate his threat.

Shi Niu initially wanted to see what ability the other party had, but upon hearing the man insult his singing, it hit a raw nerve and he grew extremely angry, jumped off the carriage driver seat and threw an empty fist towards the man. Upon seeing the driver jumped off and charging to himself, the man could not help but become astonished and as Shi Niu got closer to him, he raised the spear with one hand and used his other hand to pull the horse's reins.

The people from Huanxi villa thought that he was going to charge his horse forward and thrust the spear towards Shi Niu, and even though they knew that Shi Niu was a top exponent in external martial arts, they still sweated beads of perspiration in worry for their comrade.

But contrary to their expectation, the man pulled his reins not to bring his horse forward but back instead!

Not just Shi Niu, everyone was stunned at the moment.

What was he doing?

While everyone was feeling astonished, the person disappeared into the forest without leaving any traces behind.

Shi Niu wrinkled his brow and just as he was about to return to his seat, he heard a gong sound echoed from the trees, and from inside the forest, horses after horses charged out. Behind the horses were ten over heroes wielding weapons rushing out.

The men on horseback immediately stopped in front of Shi Niu and formed a row of four. Apart from the frail looking scholar on the extreme side, the other three men were all well built with a large blade in their hands, sitting upright on their horses without saying anything.

The man who was dressed as a scholar brought his horse forward and asked, "Where are you from? You have some guts indeed to dare stand up against a bull, I guess that you must have some background."

Shi Niu wrinkled his brow and said, "Why do you care about where I am from? If you are smart enough. Hurry and clear the road for us to pass or don't blame us for not being courteous."

The scholar did not laugh but the group of men behind him did as if they had not met such a proud victim before.

The scholar said again, "This brother, I can see that you are big and strong with a dignified experience so I guess you know some martial arts and have some secret moves. However, can't you see who you are facing up against, not just the three of us but our ten over brothers behind? No matter how strong you are, how many nails are you able to hit? Why not just leave behind some gold and everyone can save themselves some injuries and not spoil our relationship?"

Shi Niu laughed booming and said, "Your grandpa Shi would only steal other people's thunder, who would dare to steal anything under my nose instead. If you upset me, I will beat my way to your nest and take all your gold for myself."

At that moment, the middle horseman wrinkled his brows and said, “Leader, why bother talking so much, we have the advantage and I am not afraid of whatever martial arts he has. Let’s just take the carriages and grab any gold we see, frighten any women we see, wouldn’t that be more exciting?”

The people from Huanxi mountain villa were initially split between a group standing outside and a group still in their carriages as they all watched the spectacle, and upon hearing the other party say such words with the intention of humiliating their villa master, they grew angry and all jumped off the carriage with weapons in their hands. Apart from some female disciples who were standing guard at the perimeter of the carriages, most of the people were standing at the front behind Shi Niu.

He Tianshu instructed Zhang Xiaohua softly before drawing his sword and guarding beside the carriage where Ou Yan and the rest were in, and Zhang Xiaohua did not get off the carriage but walked to the front and sat beside the disciples who were in charge of the logistics, looking out expectantly at the scene from the window.

Upon seeing that the carriages had many people wielding weapons, the advisor’s face changed colour and he said to the leader, “Please be appeased, Jianghu is no longer the same as before, we are no longer as barbaric as in the past and everything can be reasoned out. Like even though I say that I would rob the rich to help the poor, one must still keep up with the times or he will be laughed at by his peers. As the saying goes, one rather throws money than to throw his face, even if we die from failing, are we still strong heroes who have our own ambitions and dreams.”

The leader at the side spat and said, “This old me had done countless robberies, why would I behave like this today? Who cares about being civilized, does the other party look like they want to talk? They are already carrying their weapons so what are still waiting for?”

The main leader said, “Old second, take a step back and cool your head. Now is not the time for us to argue among ourselves, if we do not aim high, how will we get any support? I believe that our advisor’s argument is reasonable, if we cannot convince the other party by force, it will not be too late to take action later.”

As the strong men were discussing among themselves, their conversation could not be hidden from the people from Huanxi mountain villa who grew more surprised as they listened, were these people here to rob or talk?

At that moment, the leader rode his horse forward and shouted to Shi Niu, “This brother, you can see that we are not a group of rowdy gangsters but people who are doing things for the greater good. Even though we asked you to leave behind your money and we will let you pass, we are actually not willing to fight upon seeing your fighting prowess. Just count yourselves as lucky to have met me, this humble person has recently come back from studying overseas and brought back new methods of robbery which can solve this situation. Since you all have come to our territory, you naturally have to listen to my words and as long as you can pass my test, we will let you go scot free. If not, you will have to leave behind your money and women or not blame us for being too brutish, what do you think?

Even though they could understand his words, everyone did not know how to reply. When they met with robbers in the past, they would just go straight to the fighting yet this foreign robber actually talked about some rules making their thoughts confused.

At that moment, Ou Yan who was still in the carriage and had yet to reveal herself extended her hand from the carriage and motioned a female disciple over. The disciple went over and Ou Yan muttered some instructions, the female disciple then walked over to Shi Niu and relayed some instructions.

Shi Niu’s brows wrinkled upon hearing and he said to the group of string men, “Alright, my master has spoken. You can share your plan and we will accommodate you, I just want to see if you will walk away upright or with your backs bent at the end of this.”

The advisor was overjoyed when he heard the reply, he said, “That would be best, we can compete fairly without shedding any unnecessary blood. Sigh, there are still people in Jianghu who would fight as soon as the next opportunity arises, that is not too good. Even if no one gets injured, it is not nice to spoil the surround trees and flowers, or hurt any potential relationships. Oh, I won’t say any further, now that you are in our territory, you will have to follow our rules. Three of your people will versus three of ours, and you pass if you can win two of

the matches. If you lose at two matches, then you will leave behind the four carriages and all the ladies, what do you think?”

After the people from the mountain villa heard their explanation, they slapped their foreheads, oh my gosh, after speaking for half a day, all they were asking for was a battle of three matches? What a waste of time, but at least they were upfront about it, although such an idea sounded like it came from some wild chicken rubbish sect since they explained it in such a disarrayed manner. Still, it was probably considered one of the most organized explanations in the world of bandits.

Shi Niu naturally did not dare to agree without consulting the villa master, he walked quickly to the carriage and explained the match to Ou Yan. These strong people were indeed good at calculating, himself, if they added him and He Tianshu together, they still needed one more person. However, Shi Niu was reluctant, he said, “Villa master, I alone can handle this group of riff-raff, why bother going through all the actions.”

Madam Qin smiled and said, “After coming out for so long, we are all feeling bored and anxious since rushing to our destination was the only thing in our minds. Now that something fun has served himself up to us, why don’t we enjoy and savour the moment? I have not seen such an interesting bandit in my many years of roaming around.”

Shi Niu was not someone who did not know propriety, since the villa master and Madam Qin have stated their opinion, he was too lazy to bother about their reasons and went back up to say, “Alright, our master had agreed. However, we have another question. What happens when we win? What are you going to do?”

The advisor smiled apologetically and said, “We have not thought of this yet, but since this is my territory and I call the shots, the rules will be set by me. Hence, we will let you pass our territory if you win the match.”

Shi Niu was too lazy to discuss any further, he waved his hands and said, “Are the three matches occurring at the same time or one after another?”

The leader rolled his eyes and said, “Of course they are happening at the same time. Time is money, and the earlier it ends the longer we can rest. You guys will

also be able to cross sooner, what do you think?”

Shi Niu was about to agree when an oriole-like voice came from inside the carriage, “Improper.”

When the strong men heard the voice, their eyes gleamed as they turned their gazes towards the carriage hoping for some great beauty to appear.

Unfortunately, when Madam Qin came out, everyone almost scratched out their heads and felt huge pangs of regret, the voice was so melodious so how could the person look so plain?

Madam Qin stood at the head of the carriage and said, “If the three matches are happening simultaneously, don’t we have to hold them in different places? Won’t our carriages be in danger if your subordinates do not follow our rules and rushed up to attack us? I suggest that we hold each match one after the other!”

Chapter 123: Great loss

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Great loss

The advisor did not seem embarrassed as if his plan was exposed, he only shook his head and said, "Sigh, we can't discuss the chill with summer insects, time is precious yet you are so willing to waste it and even doubt our characters and morality. Aren't you looking down too much on us new generation mountain kings, forget it, since you have specially come from afar, we shall give in to your request and do as you say."

After which, he turned his horse and walked back to the main leader, whispered something over to the latter, and the main leader nodded his head before the advisor announced, "Since it has been decided, who are you going to send as your first representative? Is it this block of wood?"

Shi Niu became enraged and was about to walk up to the front when Madam Qin called him to stop.

Shi Niu was puzzled as he walked back to the carriage where Ou Yan said, "Shi Niu doesn't have to be angry, we are only going to have some fun. Do you think those mountain bandits have someone in their midst who can defeat Madam Qin? However, we are afraid that they would use tricks so it is better to send He Tianshu first to test the waters."

Shi Niu was surprised, he asked, "He Tianshu? Is he reliable?"

Madam Qin smiled and said, "Even though He Tianshu is not a high-ranked disciple within the sect, he is at least a squad leader material and is much stronger than a normal disciple. It is most suitable to send him up first, and I doubt there will be many among this bunch of riff raff who can match up to his skills. Even if he loses, we have nothing to worry about, aren't you here for that?"

I don't think any of the three men will be a match for you."

Shi Niu did not have much opinions, he said, "Both you call the shots in this journey so we will do whatever you say."

Madam Qin called He Tianshu to the front and also gave him a set of instructions. He Tianshu was already prepared to go up, among the mountain villa people in this party, he could be considered the third highest-skilled expert so he secretly felt honoured for having this opportunity to shine.

When He Tianshu took his sword and walked up to the front, he greeted the advisor who was on horseback and said, "My name is He Tianshu and I will be gaining some pointers from your side, may I know who will be matched to me?"

The advisor studied He Tianshu for a while and smiled, he said, "This person in front of me has such a dignified and awe-inspiring appearance so I believe you must be an expert, and we will naturally treat you seriously. Please wait for a moment."

Then, he summoned a person who was on his side, "We would require our subleader to show his hand and let them know your prowess."

The subleader drew his knife and got off his horse wordlessly before walking to He Tianshu's front, entered a stance and said, "Please."

He Tianshu saw that his opponent was ready so he did not remain courteous for long, he pulled out his sword as well and pointed it to the other party, and thus, the two men began to exchange strokes with each other.

Even though He Tianshu was cautious when he first stepped up, he was actually treating his opponent lightly which was unsurprising as a Piaomiao sect disciple. Even though he was not a core disciple, he always had confidence in his abilities and believed that the opponent would not be a match for him.

However, after exchanging a few stances, he realized that the other party was not like he expected, his offence and defence was rooted on good foundations and was spirited when he fought. As a result, He Tianshu could not help but step up his game and became more serious and manoeuvred his sword "Shua shua" even further executing stance after stance as he pressed on continuously to attack the subleader. When the subleader saw He Tianshu changed up his

approach, the corners of his mouth curved up into a smile and his sword stances became even wilder, using offence as a form of defence and not allowing He Tianshu to gain a single advantage.

The other people from Huanxi mountain villa were initially like He Tianshu, but when they saw that he could not gain the upper hand, they became slightly astonished and began to observe the strong man's sword martial art with more curiosity.

Ou Yan wrinkled her brows and asked Madam Qin, "Madam Qin, how did such a high-level expert appear among this bunch of riff raff? Or has the entire Jianghu become stronger as a whole during these years? Our Piaomiao sect disciple is actually being pressed down by a bandit, has the sun risen from the west?"

Madam Qin also had a flustered expression on her face, she said, "Villa master has seen the situation clearly, this strong man is indeed not any weaker than He Tianshu, how could someone from the backwaters have such skill, this is really strange."

As the saying goes, spectators watch for the liveliness and the participants see the path, everyone was growing more worried but Zhang Xiaohua had a puzzled expression on his face, why?

Ever since He Tianshu and the strong man began their match, Zhang Xiaohua had been thinking non-stop in his heart, "What is this squad leader He doing, why is he playing around with his opponent? For this stance, wouldn't elder Yu's third variation of the sword stance be just perfect to pierce through his defence? Sigh, and for this stance when the opponent wielded his sword to the front, the tenth variation of the sword stance would be just right to pierce through his chest and snatch the victory. Sigh.... and for this stance, you can just use the first variation to counter it, such a simple solution-ya, oh, I guess squad leader He is just playing with him."

Actually, for Zhang Xiaohua to move the chess pieces like a king was something only a spectator could do, if he was the one personally facing off with the opponent, he might be at a loss when the other party threw an attack towards him, not to mention be able to think of which stance to perfectly counter the

attack. Furthermore, as the saying goes, the spectator seems clearly, when one's life is in the midst of danger, where would he find the time to carefully observe his opponents and read his thoughts?

Of course, a large reason why Zhang Xiaohua could make his observations was due to elder Yu teaching him a profound sword martial art, it was actually the elder's life-saving measure.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was analysing the battle, a new development occurred in the battlefield. After not being able to pierce through the other party's defence, He Tianshu became frustrated and his face frowned slightly. With a twist of his body, another set of Piaomiao sect's secret sword martial art was executed, and the moment it did, the subleader became shocked and worried and he deflected from the left and right, and was actually pushed back. After stepping back a few steps, he also changed his sword martial art and the style of his movements changed drastically as his body began to swim around He Tianshu, and his sword stances also became more mysterious. Hence, not long later, the match became a tie again.

A winner had yet to emerged after the two men fought for half a bell, and the Huanxi mountain villa people became slightly relaxed; only Ou Yan and Madam Qin were suspicious as they wondered that background the bandit had.

At that moment, the advisor spoke up, "Stop, stop the match."

When the subleader heard these words, he struck one last time against He Tianshu's long sword before turning his body and retreating to outside the circle, then looked silently at the advisor. When He Tianshu saw his opponent left, he did not chase after the latter and only displayed a defensive pose as he observed the proceedings carefully in fear of any sneak plans.

The advisor said aloud, "This brother's martial art is actually so profound to battle our subleader to a standstill, such a surprise indeed. However, both men are equally matched and continuing this match would only be a waste of time, so why don't we count this as a tie?"

He Tianshu was unsure and he turned back to look at Madam Qin, and Madam Qin who was standing at a side naturally saw everything that happened clearly. The opponent was indeed not weaker than He Tianshu so calling the match a

draw was not disadvantageous to them at all. Thus, she replied aloud, "Alright, advisor is fast and efficient so we agree to your idea. Let's take a break and prepare for the second round."

He Tianshu sheathed back his longsword and walked towards the carriage, while the subleader remounted his horse and returned to his position.

Madam Qin waited until He Tianshu was closer before saying softly, "Squad leader He, what do you think of the other party's skills?"

He Tianshu's face was slightly flushed as he said, "This person is awesome, he did not appear flustered or worried despite having fought for half a day so perhaps he still has something under his sleeves. I have no idea where this strong man came from. Hallmaster Qin, I have not clinched victory for this match and am feeling regretful for so."

Madam Qin smiled and said, "Squad leader He does not have to mind himself so much, this is only some entertainment to pass the time and you have not gained any disadvantages for our side so all is still fine. There will always be a higher mountain and the Jianghu is so wide, so squad leader He does not have to blame himself."

A moment later, the advisor spoke up loudly again, "Other side, have you finished your discussion? Shall we begin the second round now?"

Madam Qin looked towards Shi Niu and asked, "Should you or I go up this round?"

Even before Shi Niu replied, Ou Yan said from the carriage, "Shi Niu, you can go up first, Madam Qin does not like to fight in risky situations, if you won, our victory will be half confirmed and at the very most, we will only have a tie in the end. Even if we give up the third match, what else could these string men do?"

Shi Niu nodded upon listening and walked steadily to the front.

When the advisor saw Shi Niu walked up, he snickered before saying to the main leader, "Main leader, everything is up to you now, please show the other party how powerful you are."

The main leader laughed heartily before getting down his horse and picking up his blade, he then walked towards Shi Niu.

When he reached closer to Shi Niu, one could see that even though he was not small, he was still at least half a head shorter than Shi Niu. The main leader raised his head slightly and looked at Shi Niu's quiet expression before smiling and said, "What is the name of this brother? Can you let me know?"

Shi Niu shook his head and did not speak, but the main leader did not press further and said, "In that case, I would like to invite this brother to prepare his stance. Oh, you don't use weapons?"

Upon hearing his words, Shi Niu shook his head again and said, "My fists are my weapons, you just be careful for yourself."

The main leader smiled with his eyes and said, "In that case, I won't be courteous anymore."

After finishing his sentence, he raised his blade and chopped it towards Shi Niu's head. Upon seeing the attack, Shi Niu was not afraid and moved his body slightly to avoid the blade before punching a fist towards the side of the blade. How would the main leader follow his will, he twisted his wrist and changed his stance as the blade cut towards Shi Niu's wrist.

Even though Shi Niu was dim-witted, he was not stupid and even though his adamantium hands were already at a level above weapons, who knew if the main leader's blade is some kind of special weapon? If he suffered a serious injury from his carelessness, then Shi Niu's decades of experience in Jianghu would have been for nothing.

Shi Niu quickly changed his stance and avoided the blade before throwing a palm thrust towards the main leader's chest. The main leader could not fully avoid the counter attack, his left hand clenched into a fist and punched towards Shi Niu's palm, and thus, the two men confronted directly after only a few rounds of exchanges.

A simple fist faced against a palm thrust, but the result exceeded everyone expectations.

When the main leader's fist collided with Shi Niu's palm, it was like how Yu Deyi and Zhang Xiaohua collided with each other during that particular day, the main leader's body flew in the air with a mouthful of fresh blood spurting out.

The main leader did not fall unconscious like how Zhang Xiaohua did that day, instead, he took large steps towards his horse and mounted it before signalling to the advisor. The advisor shouted aloud, “Stop.....”

The sub leader and third sub leader who did not show his hand, as well as the other people behind all broke their formation and ran back towards the forest, their legs were as fast as a sea wave and in a blink of an eye, they all disappeared.

Thus, the people from Huanxi mountain villa were left staring blankly at each other not knowing what to do. The empty space before them was occupied by a bunch of fierce strong men just moments ago who were planning to rob them, and they even mentioned having a third match bit now, not a single hair on a person was left as though the previous incident had not occurred at all.

A moment later, everyone raised their voices in unison and cheered as though they just survived a life-or-death situation. Shi Niu was not affected much, he raised his palm and looked at it before turning back without much expression on his face as though he was unhappy with the results of his match. When Shi Niu walked to the carriage’s front, Madam Qin asked in a concerned voice, “Shi Niu, the person did not have any tricks hidden?”

Shi Niu shook his head and said, “Not at all, but his blade martial art does not appear simple, so how could his inner energy be so poor? Even though my adamantium hands are powerful and can break bones, someone with a high enough inner energy should be able to block it. From his response, I don’t think he had learnt any profound inner energy cultivation method, it should only be a common inner energy martial art that he had practiced instead.”

Madam Qin nodded her head and said, “This main leader and sub leader martial arts are about the same, and when the sub leader was able to fight with He Tianshu to a draw, then he is naturally not a match for you as well and it is quite likely that he will be knocked out with a palm as well. However, I feel that these group of mountain bandits are not simple, even though they set up these three matches, they just disappeared so suddenly before concluding the results.”

Qiu Tong said softly from her side, “Perhaps after seeing elder brother Shi

Niu's martial art, they realized their inferiority and were frightened off, we can never be sure."

Ou Yan smiled and said, "It may be as Qiu Tong said. All of you have roamed in Jianghu for long and are used to profound and deep plans, but there are many things that are just that superficial. This group of mountain bandits seems smart so they probably wanted to use an empty city trick to scare us before killing all of us, but upon seeing our reaction, they realized that they do not have the upper hand and instead set up the three matches proposal to test our prowess. When they saw our actual power, they probably got frightened off and ran away in fear of their lives."

Everyone became enlightened when they heard her conjecture and they called out in agreement. Even though Madam Qin was still suspicious, the danger had already passed so saying anything more was useless and she let it slide instead.

Even though the strong men had left, they still had to pass through the forest and to prevent any further altercations, He Tianshu and a few disciples went out to scout the road ahead first. Even though the forest was not big, it could also not be considered small and they only returned after the time it took to boil a kettle of tea. The forest was indeed deserted without a single shadow of a person.

Hence, everyone decided to load up the carriages again. The disciples got off the carriage and walked forward until all the carriages left the forest and since they were no more events that occurred, they believed that the mountain bandits had truly fled. Then, they got back on the carriages and continued their journey.

On a mountain peak not far from the forest, the group of mountain bandits got off their horses and sat on the grass, the advisor smiled and said to the main leader, "Old Zhao, how was my act as an advisor?"

Old Zhao laughed and said, "Very good, you are truly talented. I will definitely not be able to learn what you just did, unlike old Hong whose face was expressionless like a dead man, not daring to say anything in fear of revealing himself."

The third sub leader said unhappily, "I was not good at acting in the first place,

I'm still okay if you ask me to fight and kill people, but posing as a mountain bandit? You all forced me to come so I have no choice but to remain silent throughout."

The second sub leader nodded and said, "This Piaomiao sect disciple is truly quite good, the one who sparred with me who surname was He, his sword skills were actually quite good to almost force me to reveal my true hand. Luckily Qi Xiucan stopped us in time or I would have revealed my identity."

Qi Xiucan said, "I already knew that brother Ma hates losing, we already agreed to only test out their power so there is nothing wrong with losing, yet why did brother Ma treat the match like it was real? However, old Zhao, is this Shi Niu really so powerful that a palm thrust was enough to make you cough out blood?"

Old Zhao saw the concerned look the rest gave him and he smiled mysteriously, "Do you really think I was injured by that Shi Niu, I guess our acting has passed the test then. From the most reliable news we have, this Shi Niu is their strongest person in this party but if I were to fight with all my power, ten to a hundred stances will not be enough to determine the winner. However, if a palm strike is enough for me to cough out blood for real, then he has to dream even longer, I only bit my tongue to simulate spitting out blood earlier."

Everyone then realized the truth and they gave him the thumbs up.

Qi Xiucan said, "Apart from Shi Niu whose martial arts is the highest, we are already well aware of their fighting power. This Madam Qin's skill level is already known by us, but according to our reports, she had practiced rather hard these recent years so I hope that there had been no particularly great advancement in her skill during then."

Old Zhao squinted and said, "The master had already said before not to analyse too deeply, this woman has a history of being crafty so we have to avoid being discovered by her. While her martial arts are rather good, it will still be far from Shi Niu so we can rest easy. However, as for this surnamed He, he might be quite troublesome. Even though his martial arts skill is not very high, he can still put up a good fight and because of this, our current manpower will be insufficient. Qi Xiucan, what do you think we should do? Shall we wait for the

master to send more reinforcements, or do we...”

Qi Xiucan smiled and said, “About this, none of you have to worry because our master have already made sufficient arrangements. Our mission has to be completed without fail, and succeed within a single try without letting anyone escape. If not, once Piaomiao sect’s Ou Peng learns of us, we will all be in deep trouble. Even if their power is this much, our master will have thousands of methods to handle with them, but because we do not want to reveal ourselves, all of us now have to act with more caution. For now, all of you should rest yourselves and wait for master’s next step of his plan.”

Everyone did not say anything else as they sat quietly.

Qi Xiucan walked out to a deserted area and took out some writing materials, he wrote something on a piece of paper and called a silk-robed hero over, whispered something to his ear before letting him leave. The silk robed hero untied the knot on a tree and mounted a horse before galloping away in a particular direction, and in a blink of an eye, he disappeared. Thus, one could tell that the horse he rode was of extremely good breed.

Chapter 124: Robbed (1)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Robbed (1)

How would the people from Huanxi mountain villa know of these events, they were happily discussing the previous incident and as they thought back to Shi Niu's might, they felt deep admiration and jealousy. Thus, many people made up their minds to work harder when they returned back to the sect in order to reach a similar level of martial arts in the future.

Only Shi Niu was as nonchalant as before, he steadily steered his carriage as though he was unaware of being idolized by the many disciples there, and fortunately for the rest of the passengers, he was not in the mood to sing that particular song of his because of the previous match. Otherwise, the image that the disciples had built up would crumble down immediately.

Of course, not all of the mountain villa people were feeling excited or unbothered, there was currently one person who was feeling upset at himself, and the person was He Tianshu.

Even though He Tianshu could not be considered as a remarkable person within Piaomiao sect, he was a leader and despite being dispatched to Huanxi mountain villa to work in the fields, his martial arts were still of substance or why would he be assigned as a squad leader? He already knew that there was a disparity between him and Shi Niu but was unaware of by how much. Now that he saw for himself, he had fought with his opponent for almost half a day without any sign of victory while the other party seemed as if he still had some excess strength, yet Shi Niu could use a single palm thrust to cause their leader to fly away with internal injuries. From his observations, there was not just a star between him and Shi Niu, and he had been too proud of himself in the past.

From today on, he would embark on an even longer journey ahead.

In the party, there was another person whose mood was different from the rest, it was the unbothered and carefree Zhang Xiaohua. He did not learn martial arts the traditional way and was thus unaware of the hardships and dangers of learning martial arts, especially when he saw Shi Niu pushed the person into the air with a single palm thrust, he recalled his own incident and lost all interest in the matter. Thus, while everyone else was discussing excitedly, he already picked up his book silently and ignored all other matters.

He did not even notice He Tianshu's dejection.

Soon after, the robbery incident rolled off everyone's mind like the waves in a sea, it became a joke for everyone to share after their dinner, or something trivial to share with when there were Piaomiao disciples to welcome them in the town they passed by.

However, the listener may have a different interpretation of the same event, and the Piaomiao disciple in this particular town, Lan Dong, was a meticulous person by nature. He felt something amiss although it was normal for the Huanxi mountain villa people to be unaware of. After all, they were only passing by the place, but he had been in this area for many years so why had he not heard of mountain bandits around before? Furthermore, the bandits had martial arts that were uncommon.

Thus, a small ball of suspicions appeared on his heart, but these thoughts were not something he could share with Ou Yan and the rest. After all, they had already put the matter to rest and declared the group to be bandits, perhaps a new group of bandits really appeared recently while he was not paying attention?

All he could do was find a way to write a message to inform his own superior so they could make the appropriate decision, and he believed that once his superior saw that this matter was related to villa master Ou, he would revert it back to the upper echelons of the sect without delay.

His heart only settled down after he sent the message, but the next thing he had to do was find an opportunity to remind Ou Yan, Shi Niu or someone else to put up their guards.

However, when he talked to Ou Yan and the rest, Ou Yan and Shi Niu did not take the matter seriously at all to his surprise, and only Madam Qin wrinkled her brows slightly as if she wanted to say something but did not because of Ou Yan's firm expression. She knew that Ou Yan was determined to visit Rejuvenation valley and anything she said would be taken with a pinch of salt.

However, when the matter came down to it, how many people would have learnt of Ou Yan's trip to Rejuvenation valley?

Even if they learnt about it, what reasons do they have to stop her from going?

Could they just be bored and wanted to stir up trouble for them?

When Lan Dong saw that his words of caution were not heeded at all, he did not pursue the matter further and only offered to send some disciples to follow her before she left. However, his suggestion was declined because they were already not many disciples in this small town and their martial art skills were only average. This Lan Dong was only about He Tianshu's level but he could not leave the town for long, and unless there was a good reason for him to leave, the other party would only accept his kind intentions.

Ou Yan stated that she did not want to disrupt the daily operations of Piaomiao sect as the main reason when she rejected Lan Dong's suggestion.

Hence, the party boarded up the carriages again and continued on their journey while Lan Dong returned to his town and continued his daily tasks.

On the second night after Ou Yan and her party left, Piaomiao sect send down their instructions and when Lan Dong opened the message that was sent via pigeon carrier, his face lost its colour. The words written on the message were, "Piaomiao sect has sent an elder over to provide additional assistance, immediately send out all your manpower upon receiving this message to protect the villa master, her safety is of paramount importance."

Lan Dong could not help but call out bitterly, the distance between him and Ou Yan was already two days and nights worth of travel so who would know what had happened to them? He quickly wrote a simple reply and sent back the pigeon before spreading the instructions down to the other Piaomiao disciples in the town. However, this town was not within Piaomiao sect's area of influence and their manpower was dispatched quite far apart, while the next closest town

was very far from their own so he was unable to pass the message soon enough. Because of all these problems, he could only try and spread the message for now.

After he finished these tasks, Lan Dong immediately assembled the disciples in the town and rode their best horses to follow the path Ou Yan and her party took as they tried to chase the latter.

After Ou Yan and the rest departed from the town Lan Dong and the other Piaomiao disciples were stationed at, they followed the pre-determined route and continuously went ahead. The only difference was after the previous robbery, they raised their level of alertness and whenever they encountered any suspicious place ahead, they would send some men to scout the area beforehand. In this way, they passed the next few days and no unusual event occurred during the period while everyone slowly let down their guards.

Actually to these people, these robberies did not account for much, after all, to people like Shi Niu and Madam Qin, which of them had not experienced the bloodshed and killings of Jianghu? The only obvious problem was the insufficient manpower and that they still had to protect Ou Yan so they had to think thrice before taking any steps to not let anything pass through their gaps.

Three days passed like that, and during that particular night under light of the setting sun was a place that was neither an inn nor a town ahead of them. From the map, the nearest town was nowhere close to their current location so they guessed that they would have to spend the night in the wilderness again. Thus, Madam Qin quickly instructed Shi Niu to go over to find a place for them to set up their base.

As the sky slowly turned darker, the carriage finally reached the bank of a small river where a large empty space that was suitable for setting up tentages was. Hence, everyone unloaded from the carriages and placed the required things out to prepare to set up camp for the night.

Even though the matters of setting up camp and digging up entrapments were unrelated to Zhang Xiaohua, the boy had gotten along well with everyone else during this period of time so why not lend them a helping hand? Not to mention that Zhang Xiaohua's abnormal strength was a great help in moving the items off

the carriage and setting up the poles, et cetera, so everyone grew to like this hardworking boy. When everyone was finally done with setting up, they split into their different responsibilities. The male disciples went to patrol the vicinity while the female disciples and the mountain villa people prepared the food, leaving Zhang Xiaohua free to himself.

Zhang Xiaohua saw that there was still some time before dinner so he looked around at the surroundings but it was mostly pitch black as though they were in a small forest. His heart stirred, why not use this opportunity to gather some firewood while finish his homework for the day.

After he made up his mind, Zhang Xiaohua got up and was prepared to leave but after taking a few steps, he heard someone called him and when he turned around, it was Qiu Tong with Ou Yan and Madam Qin beside her.

Zhang Xiaohua quickly stopped and smiled at them while greeting, and after getting over with the courtesies, Qiu Tong asked, "Zhang Xiaohua, are you going out?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "I saw that there is some time left before dinner so I plan to get some firewood from the forest for us to use at night."

Qiu Tong praised, "Such a good boy, you even know to pick up firewood for us."

Zhang Xiaohua quickly said humbly, "It is nothing, elder sister Qiu Tong, I do this often at home."

At that moment, Ou Yan asked, "Pick up firewood, or are you planning to practice your martial art?"

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he asked, "Elder sister Ou, how did you know?"

Ou Yan smiled and said, "Throughout the journey, you would go out to find somewhere to train your martial arts, how would we not have noticed? However, Zhang Xiaohua, you have really exceeded my expectations, and are very hardworking. I have even heard He Tianshu said that you would read every day, and have gone through many of the books in the collection I lent you."

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned slightly red as he said in an embarrassed tone, "Elder sister Ou, I do not have a choice as well. The fist martial arts I practiced is

broken and incomplete and I am too ashamed to show anyone, while elder Yu taught me the sword martial art and disallowed me to let anyone know but I am afraid that I would forget so I can only avoid other people when I trained.”

Ou Yan let out a laugh and said, “I do not have any intention of blaming you, and am just complementing your diligence. As for elder Yu’s sword martial arts, I am well aware of the matter so you can practice it to your fill. Just be like before and not show it to anyone. Seeing how dedicated you are to martial arts, once this trip is over, I will speak on your behalf to my elder brother to see if you can be given any opportunities.”

Who was Ou Yan’s elder brother? That was the sect master of Piaomiao sect, just a sentence from him could fulfil all of Zhang Xiaohua’s dreams. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua could not believe what he was hearing as he stood dazed at the spot.

Qiu Tong saw Zhang Xiaohua’s foolish expression and said softly, “Zhang Xiaohua, aren’t you going to thank the young mistress quickly.”

Zhang Xiaohua woke up from his dream and said with a face full of excitement, “Thank you elder sister Ou, I will definitely practice well if given the chance.”

Ou Yan said, “Zhang Xiaohua, don’t be happy too soon. I am only saying it, but whether or not it becomes a reality depends on yourself.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Just having this opportunity is enough, elder sister Ou, I will definitely seize the chance. Oh right, there is another matter which I do not know if I should say.”

Ou Yan asked curiously, “What other matter? Say it.”

Zhang Xiaohua said sheepishly, “About this, He Tianshu also wants to look at the books you lent me. Is that okay?”

Ou Yan laughed, she said, “It’s fine, He Tianshu is not an outsider anyway. Everyone from the pharmacy hall would all want to learn about herbs, he is no exception. Oh right, do not spoil my books or I won’t let him borrow them.”

Only then did Zhang Xiaohua calmed down, he had been trying to find an opportunity to ask Ou Yan about He Tianshu’s request ever since He Tianshu bought him the small sword but could not find the time to, so at least he

accomplished this aim that day and his heart inevitably felt lighter. As the saying goes, one becomes guilty when they owe a favour.

At that moment, a melodious voice sounded out, “Zhang Xiaohua, how is your right hand now? Can it still hold a sword?”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at Madam Qin gratefully and said, “Elder sister Qin, thank you for your concern, it is still fine and the recovery is very fast, I can already hold a sword although it is still not as comfortable as before.”

Madam Qin said, “If your fingers are not nimble, it will be a large impediment to your sword martial arts. You have to practice well and take note of your own limits, do not overwork your fingers or the consequences will be severe.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “I know that, I have always been doing recovery exercises and would stop immediately when I feel pain.”

The four chatted a little more before Zhang Xiaohua excused himself. However, Ou Yan stopped him again after a few steps and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, do not walk too far and come back early after your practice. There may be bad weather tonight.”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the sky upon hearing her words, and indeed, the sky was becoming dark and ominous. The usual brilliance of the stars in the night sky were hidden, and even the round moon could not be seen.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “I understand, elder sister Ou, I will come back immediately after my practice especially since I have not eaten yet.”

After finishing his sentence, he waved towards the three ladies and walked alone into the darkness.

After Zhang Xiaohua walked over to the place, he realized that it was not a forest but rather a slightly small hill so there was no firewood to pick up, although it did not mean that he could not practice his martial art.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua took out his beloved small sword and effortlessly practiced the sword martial arts over once. Perhaps because of the several days of practice, the sword martial arts had become more sophisticated compared to the time Zhang Xiaohua first pierced a hole through the bamboo. During this period, Zhang Xiaohua was mostly concentrating on his control of the small

sword, and now that his control has become so delicate, he could easily pierce through anything in front of him if he exerted additional strength such as through a rock or a large tree. However, he would use less strength on purpose and puncture a smaller hole on his target instead, this was also something Zhang Xiaohua picked up during his countless practice.

Ou Yan was indeed right, after Zhang Xiaohua finished nine repetitions of the dipper heavenly fist and felt the familiar cooling sensation envelop his body, the light pattering sounds of the rain began to sound. Since he had finished his homework for the day, Zhang Xiaohua naturally did not stay any longer and immediately ran back to the encampment. However, while he was running halfway, he felt a strange sensation and immediately stopped while the rain drops fell onto his body. When he strained his ears to listen, apart from the sounds of quick footsteps and people shouting “It’s raining” that came from the direction of their base, there did not seem to be any other movements. Perhaps it was the sound of the rain, or perhaps the rain masked the actions of the sound.

However, the rain grew heavier so Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to stay any longer as he rushed back to the base.

On the hill where Zhang Xiaohua was training earlier, a person who was dressed in dark camouflage and with his face covered appeared from nowhere and looked at the back of Zhang Xiaohua as the latter ran off. He then turned to look at the raining night sky before laughing in satisfaction, and with his qinggong, he disappeared again.

When Zhang Xiaohua reached the base, it was a flurry of chickens flying and dogs jumping, the rain fell too suddenly and even though everyone had some sort of preparation, they were still flustered by its sudden arrival and their hands and legs became busy and messy. After everyone finished packing their stuff, the rain was already falling heavily like a river from the sky.

Zhang Xiaohua was in the same tentage as He Tianshu again, and by the time the former entered, He Tianshu had already set up everything as he smiled at the boy and asked, “You went to practice again? It is raining everywhere.”

He casually threw over a towel which Zhang Xiaohua caught smilingly and

replied, "It began to rain after I finished. This rain poured for the sake of hurrying them to finish packing."

Zhang Xiaohua used the towel to dry the rainwater from his hair and suddenly recalled, "I just met the villa master, she gave her permission to let you borrow her books. However, you cannot spread them and have to keep them in good condition as well."

He Tianshu said, "I have to thank you in that case, Xiaohua."

Zhang Xiaohua felt strange and asked, "Won't it be the same if you asked the villa master yourself? Why do you need me to ask in your stead? You see her face to face every day while I have to wait for so many days before finally getting to talk to her."

He Tianshu said embarrassedly, "About this, you are still young so it is harder for you to understand. Villa master Ou is the villa master of Huanxi mountain villa, while I am a disciple of the pharmacy hall in Piaomiao sect, so I am afraid she might reject me if I asked her personally."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded in understanding, and as if he thought of something again, he said, "Oh right, I still have to thank squad leader He for saying good things about me in front of the villa master. The villa master said that after this trip is over, she would find an opportunity to talk to sect master Ou to let me learn martial arts."

"Ah? Really?" He Tianshu asked in disbelief, and he asked, "The villa master really said that?"

"Yes!" Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head happily.

He Tianshu smiled and said, "I only said the truth about you to the villa master, for you to have caught her eye is your own fate, so you have to thank her properly in the future when there is a chance to."

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "I will definitely do so. Villa master is so kind just like an elder sister, I will definitely repay her kindness."

He Tianshu continued, "However, learning martial arts depends on fate, if your body has not recovered, you might not be able to achieve much even if you learn martial arts so you need to be mentally prepared. Furthermore, Piaomiao sect

has many disciples who are just as hardworking as you, you are only considered hardworking when being compared to the other servants like Ma Jing in Huanxi mountain villa, so you will still need to put in extra effort in the future.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned solemn as he said, “I understand, squad leader He, you all treat me so well so I will definitely work hard in learning martial arts.”

He Tianshu laughed and walked up to the front and patted his shoulders, he said, “I was just as hot-blooded as you in my youth, good job, I will watch you carefully.....”

He then wrinkled his brows and said, “The rain is so heavy and our base is close to the river, I wonder if there will be any danger in the night. I shall go find Shi Niu and the rest to discuss this. Zhang Xiaohua, go and rest early tonight.”

Suddenly, right at the midst of his sentence, within the pitter-patter of the rain emerged the sounds of horses galloping. He Tianshu and Zhang Xiaohua exchanged anxious glances as they ran out of the tentage at the same time.

Chapter 125: Robbed (2)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Robbed (2)

Outside the tentage, the rain had formed lines as it flowed down the sky and covered their visions so neither could make out anything far ahead.

However, the sounds of the horses galloping were orderly and a faint tremor appeared on the ground. Although they could not see clearly, the sounds of the horses were plain and clear.

Zhang Xiaohua did not understand what was happening but he could sense oncoming danger, whereas the experienced He Tianshu's face lost its colour earlier on. He shouted to Zhang Xiaohua, "Zhang Xiaohua, hurry and go back inside, find somewhere to hide yourself in or escape from another side later on. You won't be able to help much since you don't know martial arts, so try your best to keep your life and pass a message to our sect master Ou."

After finishing his sentence, he pulled out his longsword and rushed forward.

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned to the spot, hide himself? Escape?

His mind was in turmoil.

Zhang Xiaohua could not grasp the severity of the situation, didn't they meet mountain bandits a few days ago and chased them off easily, so why is the situation now so serious that he was even required to escape?

Actually, he did not know that when He Tianshu heard the sounds of the horses, the latter knew immediately that they were well-drilled and should be here for Ou Yan. Such a motive could only mean that their pursuers were from a large sect in Jianghu, and since it was a battle between sects, then the enemy must have planned their assault well beforehand to not leave any grass

remaining. Even though there were many people in Huanxi mountain villa on the journey, it was likely that none would be able to escape and apart from a few hostages, everyone else would probably lose their lives in this collision. Since Zhang Xiaohua was still a child, his physique was small and might be able to escape under the cover of the night. Firstly, he might keep his life, and secondly, he could pass the message back to the sect so that their deaths would not be in vain. Actually, when He Tianshu wanted Zhang Xiaohua to escape, the situation was still unclear so if it turned out fine, wouldn't it be a joke if Zhang Xiaohua left first? Moreover, he was only doing the necessary preparations because if he escaped now, there might still be some time before the enemies surrounded the area so they would not be caught in the same net. If he had left later instead, they might all be caught together.

However, how would Zhang Xiaohua know that these were what He Tianshu was thinking of?

The situation was too critical and he was unable to instruct the boy in detail, and if He Tianshu turned around to see Zhang Xiaohua's dazed look, his blood would definitely boil in rage!

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the pouring rain before waking up from his daze, he walked to the interior of the tentage and extinguished the oil lamp before standing carefully in the darkness and peeping at the situation outside.

After He Tianshu ran out in the rain, he immediately used his qinggong and reached Ou Yan's tentage. Even though it was only ten steps away from his place, He Tianshu did not dare to waste any time.

When He Tianshu reached the front of Ou Yan's tentage, he heard a voice asking, "Who is it?"

He Tianshu quickly stopped and shouted, "It's me, He Tianshu."

At that moment, the voice reappeared, "He Tianshu, quickly enter."

When He Tianshu closed in on the tentage, he saw that the curtains of the entrance pulled back, and it was Shi Niu at the entrance.

After He Tianshu entered the tentage, he saw that there were many people inside, Madam Qin, Ou Yan, Qiu Tong and several female disciples were inside

waiting for instructions.

He Tianshu did not delay any further, he said to Shi Niu, “Senior brother has also heard the movements right.”

Shi Niu nodded solemnly without speaking, and He Tianshu did not mind knowing the former’s personality. Instead, he turned around to Madam Qin and asked, “Hallmaster Qin, what should we do?”

Madam Qin said, “Send our troops when enemies come, block with mud when water flows, we have been too careless previously since it has come to this. Chang Ge, bring some disciples and prepare the horses, when we begin to fight later, protect the villa master and break through the enemy ranks. Return by the same route and head towards the small village where Lan Dong and the rest are at.”

A female disciple within the tentage called out in agreement and brought two people out to the rain.

Madam Qin ordered the other disciples to go to the different tentages and inform everyone to get their weapons and prepare for battle.

At that moment, the sounds of the horses which were covered by the rain stopped, He Tianshu walked out of the tentage and looked at the scene outside, he could not help but let out a cold sigh.

Not far ahead of him was a row of horses but he was unable to count the exact number under the darkness. The horses stood steadily despite the wind and rain, presumably well trained before and on top of the horses were people in black camouflage clothes and masks on their faces so it was impossible to see where they came from.

At that moment, Shi Niu, Madam Qin and a group of female disciples came out with their weapons in hand and walked to the front of the tentage, they stood under the rain and faced the black-clothed people.

Upon seeing that the other party had not made any movement, He Tianshu turned his head to look back at Shi Niu and the rest before activating his inner energy and shouted out, “Friends from the other side, why have you surrounded our encampment, what is the matter?”

There was still no movement from the other side so He Tianshu wrinkled his brow, and just as he was about to say something else, the sound of a horse galloping appeared from the back and got closer to them. The black clothed men seemed to know the new arrival and they made way for the horse to reach the front.

When the person went up to face everyone else, one could make out a slightly short figure on the horse wearing completely black with a black mask on his face as well. When the horse finally steadied itself, the man in black snorted lightly and He Tianshu felt like a nail has struck through his eardrum causing his blood to freeze. He Tianshu activated his inner energy again before subduing the foreign pressure.

He Tianshu was extremely worried, such inner energy was at the top of Jianghu but he did not know which top tiered expert had come to kill them tonight. It seemed...

When he thought up to here, He Tianshu held his sword in his hands, he cupped his fists and said aloud with his inner energy, "The person in front must be some respected elder, so why would you want to make things difficult for this common Piaomiao sect disciple? I apologize in advance if I had offended you in anyway previously."

The black clothed man began to speak, his voice was hoarse and old as he said, "You are only a low level disciple from Piaomiao sect and do not have the qualifications to speak to me, not to mention negotiate anything. You can see clearly for yourself the current situation, so just surrender now and follow me back obediently or you cannot blame me for being too heartless."

Before he finished his sentence, Madam Qin crisp voice sounded, "The rat elder at the opposite, since you are to attack us sneakily, why bother hiding your face? Since you are from Jianghu, don't you dare to reveal your own name as well?"

The same old voice said in a neutral tone, "Madam Qin still sounds as good as before. Perhaps you have idled in Piaomiao sect for too long so you have forgotten what it feels like in Jianghu. It is ineffective to try and play games at this time, don't bother trying to stall for time. Do you think you can call for

reinforcements within the wilderness? Cut your crap and surrender now or I will send out my orders.”

After finishing his sentence, the person raised his right hand.

Since the matter had reached this level, there was naturally nothing else left to discuss. Actually, He Tianshu was trying to stall for time during that moment, but he also knew that it was wishful thinking. He only possessed that little abilities, and when confronted with the black clothed man, he was afraid not of losing but losing too quickly.

As he watched the man’s right arm slowly go down, He Tianshu did not dare to make any calls himself so he looked back to Madam Qin and Shi Niu who exchanged glances between themselves before jumping up and leaping towards the black clothed men. Thus, He Tianshu did not hesitate any longer and he also leapt forward but to another direction.

The other disciples shouted in unison as they brandished their weapons and flew over leaving behind only a few female disciples who were wielding longswords and guarding Ou Yan’s tentage.

When the black clothed man saw the oncoming Piaomiao sect members, he immediately dropped his hands and shouted a single word, “Kill!” The sound felt as though it could vibrate in everyone’s hearts.

The other black clothed men nudged their horses and rushed onward to welcome the Piaomiao sect members, and within a short moment, both parties were mixed in each other’s midst.

He Tianshu was rushing forward when a black shadow appeared and shouted aloud, “The one surnamed He, your opponent is me.” Even before the sentence was finished, a longsword slashed towards He Tianshu like lightning onto his chest. He Tianshu was frightened and he dodged immediately before executing his sword martial art. The two men exchanged swords and the sword light flashed about continuously with no victor emerging even after ten over exchanges.

Shi Niu was also rushing towards an opponent halfway when the man took out a rod and brandished it about, causing “wu wu” sounds as it moved. The falling rain were struck by the rod, and even though Shi Niu did not have any weapons,

his adamantium hands were no less inferior as he went ahead to attack the man who provoked him. As for his body, apart from vital areas, Shi Niu rushed onward without protecting himself and the rod strikes only made him wrinkle his brow without incurring much injury.

Under this reckless assault of Shi Niu, the black clothed person could not help but retreat.

Madam Qin still abandoned her snake fist that day, she took out her weapon which was a flexible sword and under her dance which was as fast and lethal as a snake out of its cave, her each stance drew blood and many people were killed or injured after a short contact. Just as she was breezing through the opponents, a red spear suddenly thrust towards her face like a dragon flipping its body. Madam Qin was not flustered, she flexed her legs and flipped her body through the air and while she was still airborne, she countered with her sword as it was thrust towards the opponent's wrist. However, the black clothed man was not simple, when he saw that his spear had struck air and the flexible sword coming towards him, he squatted and avoided the sword tip while his left leg took the opportunity to step forward right where Madam Qin's belly was. Madam Qin saw that he was highly skilled so she immediately adjusted her stance and the two began to engage in a serious duel.

At that moment, all the black clothed men apart from the old-sounding leader had already gotten off their horses, he sat stealthily on his horse and looked at He Tianshu, Shi Niu and Madam Qin who were preoccupied with their opponents before turning away to watch the others.

Ou Yan did not bring many villa disciples during her journey but they all had undergone training from Piaomiao sect. Furthermore, who among them had common skills if they could come along with her? Looking at the black clothed man, although they outnumbered the people from the mountain villa, they could not bring too much people with them in a sneak attack so they could not overcome their targets by pure numerical advantage. Moreover, to prevent themselves from being revealed and failing in their mission, one could tell that many of them were not disciples from the opponent sect which is why their level of ability was not comparable to the Huanxi mountain villa disciples. Hence, when both sides clashed with each other, two to three black clothed men would

team up to fight a mountain villa disciple and they would end up in a tie.

When the black clothed elder saw the scene in front of him, he seemed to have decided on something. Why was his master so cautious for that they even got one or two top elders from the sect in this mission, they were already able to deal with their target without going through all the trouble, and so what if their identity was discovered? Since they had already attacked, what other ripples will the other party be able to make?

However, their master was always cautious in his plans so he still had to follow the instructions that were given to him. No matter what, the entire situation was currently in his hands so all he has to do was kidnap the leader and return back to make the exchange. As he held on to that thought, the black clothed elder moved his gaze towards the tentage where He Tianshu and the others exited from and where several female disciples were guarding to prevent the entry of a few black clothed men.

Just as the black clothed elder was about to act, a change in the situation occurred at He Tianshu's side.

After fighting his opponent for a period of time, He Tianshu suddenly felt that the sword martial arts his opponent was using seemed familiar and he shouted, "You... you are the sub leader of the bandits during that day? You were actually hiding your martial arts by wielding a blade instead! no wonder I feel like your sword martial arts seemed familiar."

The black clothed man smiled and said, "Well done, Piaomiao sect disciples are indeed not ordinary, you could even tell after I went through all the trouble to mask myself. That person was me, and after fighting to a standstill that day, I will show you who is more powerful during our fight this time."

After finishing his sentence, his sword martial art actually changed and under the darkness of the night, He Tianshu became careless and was pierced on his right arm. Fortunately, his reactions were fast so he quickly pulled his sword back to protect himself and thus only suffered a light injury. Even so, the blood mixed with the rain as it dribbled down his body, and upon seeing that the situation had turned bleak, He Tianshu did not hold back anymore as he displayed the Piaomiao sect disciple's secret sword martial art to meet the

opponent's each and every stance.

Since He Tianshu opponent was the sub leader of the bandits that day, Shi Niu's opponent was most likely the main leader. Unfortunately, the main leader was using a rod this time so his stances were completely different, and even though their figures were the same, how would Shi Niu be able to recognize him? Even if he was using a sword again, Shi Niu would still be too lazy to think, that sort of "how can the same person who spurt blood after one palm thrust become so powerful today" thinking was not something Shi Niu would do, he would rather just throw an extra punch over instead!

Even though the person had previously experienced Shi Niu's martial arts, it was very brief and he underestimated the latter. At that moment, he was at an advantage but despite that, his task was more important and he was glad as long as he kept the latter preoccupied. In the worst scenario, could Shi Niu's martial art be sufficient if the elder who was still on horseback came over?

That's right, the elder on horseback had yet to make his move.

At that moment, the people from the mountain villa were like meat on a chopping block, they were slowly being sliced off by the black clothed men and at the very last moment, the butcher's knife will swing down and end everything. The black clothed elder had smiles in his eyes as though he was enjoying the game of cat and mouse, it was as if he could hear the sounds of his opponent's laments and was enjoying it thoroughly.

At that moment, the battle on the ground had reached its later stages, a grief cry would sound out every once in a while and it belonged to both the black clothed men and the Huanxi mountain villa people. However, apart from the black clothed elder, oh right, there was still Zhang Xiaohua who was hidden in the darkness of his tentage, everyone else was preoccupied with the fight in front of them. As long as they could keep their lives after this night, nothing else would be more important.

And our poor Zhang Xiaohua was at a loss of what to do at that moment.

In his thirteen years of life, he had only experienced the scuffle in Lu town and the event with the Xicui bandits during his eldest brother's wedding day. Even though he could be considered a participant in those two fights, he only played

the role of a white rat that was being kicked around and could not contribute at all to protect his loved ones. Now that he gained a shred of self-defence, he secretly wanted to try and test it out. On one hand, his life was not in danger during the incident in Lu town, and even though the altercation with the Xicui bandits was bloody, Lu Yueming had the entire situation under his control so Zhang Xiaohua had never felt as though his life was in danger. However, the current situation was different, every so often would one person become injured and succumb to his opponent. When Zhang Xiaohua was faced with such a cruel and dangerous situation, he felt an incredible sense of pressure and had difficulties breathing, forcing him to want to leave the scene immediately.

Furthermore, hadn't He Tianshu instructed him to wait until the situation was chaotic before finding an opportunity to leave?

But, what about elder sister Ou, elder sister Qiu Tong and the rest?

Zhang Xiaohua was in a dilemma at that moment.

However, he had forgotten to consider how helpful he could be if he chose to stay, he only thought of his conscience and neglected his own abilities.

Fortunately, the two sides still seemed to be in a stalemate even though they both suffered heavy losses. The black clothed men did not have additional manpower to search the tentages so Zhang Xiaohua remained safe.

There were about seven to eight tentages in the Huanxi mountain villa encampment and they all surrounded Ou Yan's tentage which was in the middle, and the tentage that Zhang Xiaohua was hiding in happened to be one of them.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was hesitating, he suddenly saw a flash of sword light across Ou Yan's tentage and a large hole appeared from behind, followed by several people who left secretly. Zhang Xiaohua could not make out their faces under the cover of the night but he guessed that it was Ou Yan and a few others.

Zhang Xiaohua felt overjoyed, his body immediately moved as he ran towards the party.

However, right at that moment, the black clothed elder who was sitting on his horse shifted his eyes and jumped off his horse, his arms flapped up like a bird that was flying off as he flew over in the direction of the tentage and landed right

in front of it.

Chapter 126: One sword thrust

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

One sword thrust

Shi Niu, Madam Qin, He Tianshu and the others were naturally fighting for their lives but they were also constantly paying attention to the black clothed elder.

Now that the elder had used his qinggong to enter their encampment, their hearts shook and their movements became even more ferocious as they tried to retreat to intercept the elder. However, how could their opponents let them do as they wished, their opponents were also using their full might to contain their attention. Especially in the case of Shi Niu's opponent, he quickly changed his martial art and his attacks became more overbearing causing Shi Niu to fumble for a bit and lose the opportunity to shed him off.

This had to be the black clothed elder's intention all along.

When the black clothed elder reached the front of the tentage, he did not enter straightaway but rather walked to the back as though he already knew that the people inside had escaped from the back.

Ou Yan and Qiu Tong, under the protection of several female disciples, crawled out of the tentage and after taking a few steps, they saw the elder walking calmly towards them. They immediately covered their mouth to hold back their screams.

The female disciple who was called Chang Ge pointed to the tentage where Zhang Xiaohua was hiding and said to Ou Yan, "Villa master, the horses are at the front of that tentage, you bring Qiu Tong over while we block that old bandit."

After finishing their sentence, the few female disciples ran over to Ou Yan's

side and obstructed the path between her and the black clothed elder.

When Ou Yan saw the backs of Chang Ge and the other female disciples, she opened her mouth to try and say something but her voice could not come out, so she clenched her teeth and ran towards the other tentage.

When the elder saw Chang Ge and the others blocking his path, he could not help but laughed saying, “Just the few of you girls want to block me? If you drop your weapons now, I will still let you live. I am only interested in catching the one whose surname is Ou, the rest of you do not interest me.”

Chang Ge and the rest did not reply and when they saw the elder come closer, they all pointed their longswords and thrust it towards the elder from different directions.

Unexpectedly, the elder did not counterattack. Instead, he walked forward calmly as the sword went closer to his body. Chang Ge and the others were feeling joyful but it turned to fear, the elder must have his own reasons for being so bold, could their attack really succeed?

Indeed, as the elder continued to walk forward, the longsword collided with the elder’s body but Chang Ge and the rest felt as if they were not piercing a human but a metal board instead. it was extremely tough and a metallic “ding” resounded as all the longswords that were strengthened by their inner energy became bent.

The elder was apparently very satisfied with the results, he laughed and picked up his arms to press on the bent longswords, and the swords “ka chang ka chang” broke apart. Furthermore, the inner energy in the swords were not fully dissipated and they rushed back into the female disciples’ arms and they felt as if they were crushed by some large object as they fell backwards, and one of them even spat out fresh blood and could not stand up anymore.

After the other few disciples fell down, they immediately leapt back up with their faces still pale, their hands holding onto their broken swords while they stood somewhat unsteadily.

As for Chang Ge, her condition was slightly better as her sword did not break, her body was still stable and she immediately rushed towards the elder. At that moment, the elder was already walking towards Ou Yan and his back was

unprotected. Chang Ge charged towards his open back with her longsword but she did not dare to let her guard down and activated all the energy in her body to produce the strike.

Earlier on when the bevy of female disciples were holding back the black clothed elder, Qiu Tong was holding on to Ou Yan while taking large steps and running towards the tentage where the horses were kept. However, due to the heavy rain, the ground was extremely muddy and so its uneven surface was covered by puddles of water. Upon stepping accidentally into a hole, she lost her shoes after pulling her leg out, but where would they find the time to bother about such an insignificant problem? Hence, she could only run forward without caring about anything else.

Unfortunately, the two frail ladies did not know martial arts so how far could they have run?

When Chang Ge's sword was about to pierce through the black clothed elder's back, Ou Yan and Qiu Tong had only run half the distance to the tentage and at that moment, Ou Yan's right foot sunk into the ground and her body lost its balance as it swerved to the right. Qiu Tong who was supporting her also succumbed to the momentum of the fall and her body fell forward.

At that moment, a frightened voice sounded from another tentage, "Elder sister Ou, elder sister Qiu Tong."

A small figure ran from afar towards Ou Yan and Qiu Tong who were on the ground, it was Zhang Xiaohua who had been hiding in the tentage!

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua already wanted to rush out when he saw Ou Yan and the rest left from the tentage's back, but the black clothed elder already reached there by using his qinggong before he even picked himself up. Zhang Xiaohua's martial art skills were poor but his senses were sharp, he saw clearly how Chang Ge and the rest were attacked by the black clothed elder and his heart froze on the spot. However, he could not hold back anymore when he saw Ou Yan and Qiu Tong fell onto the floor so he shouted aloud and ran over to try and support them before they hit the muddy ground.

Unfortunately, Zhang Xiaohua did not know qinggong and even before he left the tentage, Ou Yan and Qiu Tong both "plopped" onto the muddy ground and

their clothes became thoroughly wet, and their jade-like fair faces were covered with copious amount of mud. After Ou Yan fell down, she struggled to get up as the fall was too fierce and she was unable to recover within such a short while. Even though Qiu Tong was completely covered in mud, she did not dare to hesitate any longer and quickly pulled herself back up.

When Ou Yan fell onto the muddy ground, Chang Ge was activating all the qi in her dantian to push out her most formidable attack to use on the black clothed elder. However, the elder seemed to have eyes behind his back and when the sword that was inundated with inner energy reached his back, he suddenly turned around and his eyes stared at the sword tip. He raised up his right palm to block his front and with a “ding” sound, the sword collided like it just struck an adamantium rock when it hit the elder’s hand and sparks almost flew from the impact. The black clothed elder closed his palm and gripped onto the sword, then waved his hand and with a “ka-cha” sound, the sword broke in his hands. With another wave, the sword that was as sharp as an arrow flew back towards Chang Ge. Chang Ge was shocked, she quickly used the hilt of her sword to block the attack but it was already too late, the sword tip’s speed was too fast and when Chang Ge moved slightly, the sword already flew to right in front of her. She was only in time to avoid death, the sword tip pierced deep into her left shoulder with a loud sound coming from the impact, Chang Ge involuntarily left out a cry. The sword tip contained profound energy and Chang Ge could not even stand up straight as she was pushed back a few steps before falling onto the muddy ground.

The injury on her shoulder bled like a river and Chang Ge fainted on the spot.

The black clothed elder stood at the same position as he watched her get injured, and when Chang Ge finally fainted, he continued his steps towards Ou Yan.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua had already reached Ou Yan’s side and was extending his hand to help pull her out of the mud. The black clothed elder walked slowly towards them with a smug expression on his face. He had already noticed when Zhang Xiaohua ran out but could also tell from the latter’s heavy steps and jerky movements that he did not know qinggong. When he saw his figure, he could tell that it was a child who had yet to go through puberty so he

naturally did not put the new arrival to heart. The other Piaomiao disciples like Chang Ge could not do anything to him, not to mention a child like this. Perhaps he would only need a finger to take Zhang Xiaohua's life.

After Zhang Xiaohua pulled Ou Yan from the mud, Qiu Tong had also freed herself and when the two people supported Ou Yan on both sides as they ran forward, they realized that Ou Yan's right leg was already injured and she could no longer walk properly. It was probably due to this reason that she was unable to stand back up after falling. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua slung Ou Yan's right hand over his shoulders and bent his body slightly. Qiu Tong was surprised but she understood his intentions, thus, she quickly helped Zhang Xiaohua put Ou Yan on his back. Zhang Xiaohua had yet to go through puberty and he was almost half a head shorter than Ou Yan so it looked difficult for that skinny body to carry Ou Yan. Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua's arm strength was unordinary so it was not too difficult a task.

After Qiu Tong placed Ou Yan on Zhang Xiaohua's back, the black clothed elder had already neared them. When Zhang Xiaohua saw the impending situation, he immediately sprinted as if he was not carrying any weight, but he did not run towards the direction of the tentage but towards the river instead, while Qiu Tong followed behind.

The black clothed elder looked as if he was enjoying the chase as he watched Zhang Xiaohua and Qiu Tong's desperate attempts, he did not stop them until he saw Zhang Xiaohua ran towards the river. His brows wrinkled slightly, the elder did not mind if they escaped via horseback because with his qinggong, he was fully confident of being able to chase after them even when they rode on a horse. However, if they were in the river, due to the rising tide and the rain, the river was flowing faster and stronger so if Zhang Xiaohua jumped into the river, it would be like a cooked duck that flew from his plate, and the black clothed elder would never allow that to happen.

Just as the black clothed elder activated his qinggong and was about to chase after them, a tall black clothed man riding on a horse reached the scene and shouted in a clear voice to the entire location, "Fellow brothers, there are ten over fast horses coming in our direction, probably the Piaomiao sect's reinforcements have arrived. Everyone hurry and settle your business."

This clear voice was familiar to the Huanxi mountain villa people, as they thought about it, was it not the first bandit they encountered on the day they were robbed in the forest?

Whether or not his words were to remind his fellow accomplices or to give hope to the Huanxi mountain villa people, as least all the people on the side of the mountain villa had their morale boosted again whereas the black clothed men became demoralized as though long standing tie was broken with the sound of his signal.

Only, this person who started the commotion did not feel any sense of shame or guilt, he patted his hands and turned his horse around to leave immediately after sending his report, and the onlookers did not know if he was continuing to scout or had already fled.

The originally amused expression on the black clothed elder's face immediately turned solemn, he thought secretly, "Since it has come to thus, Ou gal, don't blame me for being heartless."

When he thought of the current situation, he did not dally any further and immediately used his qinggong to chase after Zhang Xiaohua, and in the blink of an eye, he was already at Qiu Tong's position with Ou Yan right in front of him. The elder did not increase his speed to block of Zhang Xiaohua's front, instead, he maintained his speed and circulated his qi secretly causing his hands to turn a faint gold colour. At that moment, Qiu Tong who was watching from a side shouted out immediately, "Xiaohua, behind you."

Zhang Xiaohua who was in the midst of sprinting was still sensitive to his surroundings and he had already realized that something was going on behind his back. With Qiu Tong's reminder, he immediately stopped in his tracks and at that moment, the usual martial arts practice he did, showed its results as he stopped steadily and turned around instantaneously. The black clothed elder did not stop, he continued to rush towards Zhang Xiaohua and Ou Yan with the faint golden palm in a position that was ready to strike.

Upon seeing the oncoming attack, Zhang Xiaohua did not have the luxury of putting Ou Yan back down softly, he relaxed his hands without considering the welfare of the passenger on his back and prepared his limbs to face off with the

black clothed leader.

Ou Yan and Qiu Toing were well aware of Zhang Xiaohua's martial arts skill level, he had never learnt any complete martial art fully before, not seen a single word on an inner energy cultivation method, and the way he was preparing to launch himself to the other party was without a doubt only to buy a sliver of time of Ou Yan.

Ou Yan and Qiu Tong both shouted out, "Zhang Xiaohua.....", and the pain in their voices was clearly audible.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua had already made up his mind when he was carrying Ou Yan as he ran. Even though Ou Yan was the villa master of Huanxi mountain villa, she would treat him well on a normal day basis and for the long duration that he had been in the mountain villa, she had taken good care of his wellbeing just like how Liu Qing would be concerned for him. Not only did she instruct He Tianshu to teach him martial arts, she even shared her secret books with him and even wanted Ou Peng to let him learn an inner energy cultivation method, all these were things he could never repay in kind. Now that he was in such a situation, no matter if it was Liu Qing, Qiu Tong or Ou Yan, he would not hesitate to stand in front of them, even if there was no future he could see in front of the path!

As Zhang Xiaohua lashed out in this desperate situation and rushed towards the black clothed elder, he did not try to avoid the other party's attack at all. His left hand was already feeling the familiar short sword in his breast and was naturally executing the fifth variation of the sword martial arts elder Yu taught him. A warm flow appeared from his left shoulder and travelled down his left arm which held the small sword that was being thrust towards the black clothed elder's throat.

The black clothed elder was not surprised when he saw Zhang Xiaohua turn around, but he became puzzled when he saw Zhang Xiaohua dropped Ou Yan down and threw himself towards him. However, a smile appeared across his face as he had already seen many people lose their lives to protect others, it seemed that another would join their ranks that day. This brat had close to zero martial arts so he was nothing but a moth flying towards a flame.

When he saw Zhang Xiaohua took out a toy from his breast, the smile in his eyes grew even more confident, how could this child's toy hurt his body?

He initially wanted to ignore the sword and let it pierce onto his body, after all, what else was his body which trained in the metal cocoon art over decades for? However, when he saw the youth's firm thrust, even though the sword was short, the angle and opportunity was very good and it was headed towards his throats he decided to play safe and protect his throat so he raised his left hand to grab Zhang Xiaohua's toy like how he caught Chang Ge's longsword. At the same time, the black clothed elder did not decrease his pace as his right palm turned to face towards Ou Yan who was beside Zhang Xiaohua.

At that point of time, his aim was no longer to kidnap Ou Yan but to let her die under his faint gold palm.

Before Ou Yan and Qiu Tong's voice could reach the floor, they saw the direction of the black clothed elder's palm and immediately understood his intentions. Their faces turned pale, if Chang Ge and the other female disciples could not stop him, what hope did Zhang Xiaohua have?

Could she escape his demonic palm at all?

Just as these thoughts flashed through her mind, Zhang Xiaohua's short sword which had no sharp edge already collided onto the black clothed elder's palm and the warm flow incidentally travelled into the sword. When the palm and sword contacted, there was no "dang" sound like in the case of Chang Ge's longsword, and Zhang Xiaohua did not flew into the air like how the black clothed elder envisioned. Instead, the sound "phuua" of going through flesh appeared, the bladeless short sword actually bore a hole through his hands that were fully protected by inner energy and the injury it caused was not light as it pierced completely though the black clothed elder's palm and continued straight towards his throat.

At that moment, the black clothed elder's mood made a sharp 180-degree turn, how could the faint gold palm continue to bother about Ou Yan? It immediately changed directions and slammed onto Zhang Xiaohua's chest, and at the same time, the black clothed elder summoned his inner energy to his throat until it became as tough as steel as it waited for the short sword to

bounce off itself.

However, the unusual occurred and after Zhang Xiaohua's sword pierced the black clothed elder's throat, it only stopped for a moment before continuing to go through as though it was cutting tofu without any sense of resistance and buried itself deep into the black clothed elder's throat.

The black elder's expression was as if he just saw a ghost, his eyes were wide open and his mouth opened, "he, he" but he could not say anything at that moment. His right palm had already struck Zhang Xiaohua's chest, but now that the small sword was embedded into his throat, the energy in his palms had already dissipated by forty percent. However, how could Zhang Xiaohua endure this remaining sixty percent?

When Zhang Xiaohua took the black clothed elder's palm thrust, his body flew away and he fainted in mid-air with fresh blood spurting out generously from his mouth. Even Ou Yan who was standing beside him felt the impact and she fell onto the ground with blood spilling from her mouth.

As for the black clothed elder, his situation was no better and after his right palm threw Zhang Xiaohua into the air, the small sword was squeezed out from his throat. There was not much blood that flowed out of the wound, there was only a little bit of fresh red blood that could be seen.

However, this little bit of blood was enough to take the black clothed elder's life, his bleeding left hand held on to his own throat as he looked in disbelief at Zhang Xiaohua who was still in mid-air before his legs softened and he crumbled onto the floor. Even right before his demise, his eyes were still staring indignantly at the boy.

One sword thrust, with just one sword thrust, Zhang Xiaohua took the life of this black clothed elder who had no opponent of his match in this battlefield.

Chapter 127: Disappearance

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Disappearance

When the black clothed elder activated his qinggong and left the encampment, Shi Niu, Madam Qin and He Tianshu were trying their hardest to shake off their opponents and go over to Ou Yan's side. However, the black clothed men had already investigated their abilities and their opponents were chosen specially to delay these three people from Piaomiao sect. Hence, their opponents' martial art skills were good, and the three of them could not escape during that urgent situation.

However, while in a fight for their lives, they were still monitoring the situation on Ou Yan's side from the resistance the female disciples put up to Zhang Xiaohua's appearance. They saw everything clearly, except that the black clothed elder had extraordinary inner energy and also trained in the formidable metal cocoon art so even if Shi Niu was to go up against him, the latter might still not be able to fend him off. Thus, the three people, along with the other Piaomiao disciples, were not optimistic of the situation and they feared that they would lose their lives in that moment. However, the situation had a huge reversal right when it was about to end, Piaomiao sect's reinforcements were actually arriving and the person who announced it actually told everyone so their morale got boosted up while black clothed men became demoralized.

As for the three opponents who were stalling Shi Niu and the others, they also had intentions of retreating and when they saw the black clothed elder used his qinggong to chase after Zhang Xiaohua, they threw out their last stance, retreated from the match and jumped onto their horses. If Shi Niu and the others wanted to retain these men, it would be harder for them to do so because how could the main fighting force not be following their mission to

protect Ou Yan? When they saw their opponents retreated, they did not chase after but immediately used their qinggong to fly towards the black clothed elder. In their hearts, they knew that the reason why the black clothed elder did not participate in the fight was because he wanted to go after Ou Yan, and since there was still quite a distance left, the three thought that they would definitely not reach in time. Even if the three managed to surround the black clothed elder, they still might not be able to steal Ou Yan back. Moreover, from his arrival, they could guess that he was an elder of the other sect.

These were the thoughts of Madam Qin and the rest, but while they were still rushing over, they heard Qiu Tong's scream before noticing the faint gold palms that the black clothed elder exhibited. The three were extremely shocked, where could it be seen that the elder was trying to kidnap Ou Yan, he was obviously taking her life instead!

Hence, the three pushed their speeds even faster but how could such a large distance be covered so quickly? They could only watch helplessly with their own eyes the oncoming tragedy before them.

However, although they could guess the beginning of the story correctly, they all failed to predict its end.

Even after the black clothed elder slunk onto the ground, Zhang Xiaohua flew into mid-air and Ou Yan fainted from the aftershocks onto the ground, all these happened in the time it took to create a spark from rocks. They could not understand the situation but they knew one thing for sure, Ou Yan could be saved!

When the three finally reached the scene, everything had already ended. Madam Qin rushed over to beside Qiu Tong to study Ou Yan's injuries while Shi Niu walked carefully towards the black clothed elder and studied his body from afar to confirm the latter's death. As for He Tianshu, he walked over in the direction where Zhang Xiaohua flew to try and find the boy.

At that moment, all the black clothed survivors had remounted their horses and were rushing to leave, and the Huanxi mountain villa people did not chase after but stood guard at the encampment entrance instead.

The rain continued to fall without rest, and the sounds of the raindrops could

not mask the hoof sounds of the horses that drew closer. When the three men who pretended to be bandits saw the black clothed elder's death, even though they did not understand what happened, the other party had already perished so it was now their duty to kill Ou Yan. However, it was not a feasible idea at that moment, not to mention that the Piaomiao sect's reinforcements were arriving, hence, the 'main leader' pondered for a while before raising his hands to perform a signal before taking the lead to gallop away. The remaining black clothed men did not bother to collect the corpse and they followed his lead to ride away.

Upon seeing the black clothed people left, everyone who still had swords and blades in their hands cheered immediately, and many just collapsed from exhaustion on the spot with their weapons flung carelessly on the ground.

At the same time, the sound of hooves from afar became louder and when the men on horseback reached the encampment, they shouted urgently, "Are you brothers from Piaomiao sect?"

Hadn't it been several days since they heard Lan Dong's voice?

Some disciples who recognized Lan Dong immediately replied, "Brother Lan, you finally came. It is indeed us."

When Lan Dong heard the reply, he felt a stone fell off his heart as he dismounted and looked at the wearied state of the other side. He became anxious again and asked urgently, "How is villa master Ou?"

Everyone pointed in the direction of Ou Yan and Lan Dong immediately sprinted over without caring about the mud on the ground.

When Lan Dong rushed over, Madam Qin had already taken Ou Yan's pulse and when Lan Dong saw Ou Yan's eyes which were still closed, his face turned pale and he asked anxiously, "How are the villa master's injuries?"

Madam Qin wrinkled her brows and said, "Her life is safe, but the villa master's body had always been weak and now that she took a palm from the old bandit, she has suffered rather serious internal injuries and would require quite some time to recover from them."

Upon hearing this, butterflies returned to Lan Dong's stomach.

At that moment, Shi Niu also walked over, and Madam Qin asked in half disbelief, “Has that old bandit died?”

The ends of Shi Niu’s mouth curled up and he said, “He is dead, truly. A sword pierced through his throat so he cannot be more dead, mm, and his eyes were still open and indignant even in death.”

He then asked, “How is the villa master?”

Madam Qin smiled and said, “Fortunately Zhang Xiaohua helped the villa master take this palm thrust. The final palm thrust switched its target to Zhang Xiaohua so the villa master only felt the aftershocks of the attack. It is not too serious and she can probably wake up the next day.”

Shi Niu asked in a puzzled tone, “Wake up only tomorrow? Isn’t that considered serious?”

Madam Qin replied, “Isn’t it much better than we expected?”

Shi Niu nodded in agreement and said, “That’s right, thanks to Zhang Xiaohua.”

“Zhang Xiaohua?” Lan Dong was puzzled; why did he never hear of this name before? From the way they described, it seemed that his martial arts must be rather good, but there did not seem to be any senior uncles who had that name, could it be an elder within the sect? Did an elder arrive before him? That is impossible, he had rushed over without rest on horseback so did the elder fly instead?

While Lan Dong was pondering about this mysterious elder, He Tianshu reappeared from the darkness and sprinted over, he shouted as he ran, “Zhang Xiaohua has disappeared, he probably fell into the river. Quickly get some of our brothers who can swim over to help look for him.”

“What?! Zhang Xiaohua fell into the river?” Madam Qing, Shi Niu and Qiu Tong both shouted in surprise.

Ou Yan had already suffered such serious injuries after being struck indirectly by the black clothed elder, while Zhang Xiaohua was hit squarely on his chest by the faint golden palm, so how could he not have incurred serious injuries as well?

With these injuries, coupled that he had fallen into the river, could Zhang Xiaohua still...

When they thought up to here, everyone did not dare to think any further while Madam Qin said quickly, “Shi Niu, go find some of our brothers who are good at swimming and get them to search the vicinity immediately. Lan Dong, dispatch a group of disciples to ride downriver to look for any stragglers.”

Shi Niu and Lan Dong immediately set out upon receiving their instructions, but when Lan Dong took two steps, he turned around and asked, “Hallmaster Qin, what does this Zhang Xiaohua look like?”

Madam Qin then remembered that Lan Dong did not recognize Zhang Xiaohua, she quickly apologized and said, “He is a twelve to thirteen-year-old child who has suffered serious injuries, you will recognize him on sight.”

“Twelve to thirteen-year-old child?” Lan Dong was struck by surprise and he did not believe Madam Qin’s words fully.

When Madam Qin saw that Lan Dong was still loitering around, she wrinkled her brows and said, “He is a ten plus year old child, what are you waiting for?”

“Oh, understood, I will immediately send people over.” Lan Dong woke up from his daze and quickly set out to dispatch his manpower.

Madam Qin and Qiu Tong then carefully carried the unconscious Ou Yan back to the tentage.

The rain continued to fall and the night sky was pitch black, endless darkness pervaded the encampment.

It was already after midnight but there was still bustle in the Huanxi mountain villa people’s encampment. Who would not be on their guards after suffering such a sudden attack, while the disciples that Lan Dong brought only numbered ten plus and they were all ordinary disciples with common skill. A reason why the black clothed party left so hurriedly was because they thought that their numerical advantage had been overcome, and the turning point was when their elder who had all the cards in the battle succumbed when he was trying to kill Ou Yan. This broke their confidence and was the tipping straw for their hurried departure.

If they discovered the current fighting power of the remaining forces, it was still possible for them to turn around immediately to attack again, which was why apart from the injured disciples who were nursing their wounds, the rest were still vigilantly guarding the perimeters of the encampment.

Even though the Huanxi mountain villa people's encampment was situated beside a river, the area was no longer safe as their enemies might launch another attack in the cover of the night. Coupled with several other reasons, they could only wait for daybreak before making any other major decisions.

For the same reasons, the number of disciples sent to search for Zhang Xiaohua was only few.

Actually, all the disciples currently in the encampment already learnt of the earlier events and they knew that Zhang Xiaohua had not only saved Ou Yan alone, his actions had saved the entire party as a whole. Everyone had some awareness of the black clothed elder's martial arts skill, so even if Lan Dong had reached the encampment on time, the ten plus additional manpower would not be of much use against the elder alone and everyone would have the same fate as Ou Yan and perished together.

They knew that Zhang Xiaohua was struck squarely on his chest by the elder's faint golden palm and already had some idea of his fate, even if the boy had a single breath left, it was unlikely for him to keep his life after being thrown into the river.

They were all willing to go to the river to search for him, but the river current was strong and they had no idea where Zhang Xiaohua's body would be washed to. Furthermore, the sky was still dark and rain was falling, all their torches have been extinguished so how could they get enough light to look for him? He Tianshu brought a few people and horses to go into the river to search, and even though everyone knew that it was likely to be insufficient, they could not do anything else and left the boy's future up to fate.

At the beginning, He Tianshu was shouting energetically, and the other disciples were shouting along with him. However, He Tianshu suddenly stopped as though he realized something, and he also prevented the other disciples from shouting as well. While the other disciples were feeling confused at the

beginning and wanted to ask for the reason, they dared not ask upon seeing He Tianshu's worried expression and when they pondered themselves, they could not help but admire the man. No wonder he was a leader, by shouting like this, won't they be revealing our positions to the black clothed men? Squad leader He was indeed meticulous in his work.

Why would He Tianshu be bothered about how the others thought about him, he only had one thought in his mind but, sigh, it had already passed midnight long ago.

Among the disciples who went downriver to look for Zhang Xiaohua, none were able to see far ahead due to the darkness and the safety of their encampment was a higher priority. Hence, they turned around after searching for some time and when He Tianshu saw them return, he reluctantly headed back with regrets filling his heart.

When He Tianshu reached the encampment again, Madam Qin and Qiu Tong both hurriedly went up to him and asked in a concerned tone, "Have you found him?"

He Tianshu shook his head wordlessly.

Qiu Tong's tears began to fall as she clenched her teeth tightly and her body quivered.

Madam Qin also said painfully, "Poor child."

Everyone else was also silent.

After half a bell of time, He Tianshu asked, "How is the villa master?"

Madam Win nodded and said, "She is still fine, there is not much change in her condition. As for the specifics, we will have to find a physician when day comes to find out."

He Tianshu said, "The villa master's wellbeing was also Zhang Xiaohua's wish, I will go back to the perimeters to guard, it will be troublesome if the group of black clothed men came back."

After finishing his sentence, He Tianshu was about to leave when Shi Niu came from outside and when he saw the former, he asked, "You still can't find him?"

He Tianshu replied, "Yes."

Shi Niu sighed and turned to Madam Qin to say, "About that old bandit, I have checked carefully."

Madam Qin and He Tianshu's eyes brightened, they asked in unison, "Who is he?"

Shi Niu shook his head and said, "The man's face had an injury and his features were already destroyed so I could not tell who he was. The faint gold palm and metal cocoon art are not high levelled martial arts and many people in Jianghu could also reach his level in them, so I cannot tell much."

Madam Qin nodded and asked, "What about the other bodies? Did we find any lead?"

Shi Niu shook his head again, he said, "These people already underwent strict practice, and the clothes they wore were normal night clothes and they did not carry anything unique on them. The weapons were also common ones in Jianghu so it was hard to discover anything."

Madam Qin pondered and said, "That's fine, keep these bodies and weapons and send them back to Piaomiao sect mountain villa. Even if we cannot discern their origins, the sect will have its methods so we can leave this matter to them."

Shi Niu said his acknowledgement and turned around to leave.

At that moment, Madam Qin called him again and asked, "How did that old bandit die?"

Upon hearing the question, He Tianshu also looked towards Shi Niu anxiously for the answer.

Shi Niu has a dubious expression on his face as he said, "That old bandit had two wounds, one was on his left palm and it looked like something pierced through it, whereas the other was at his throat as though a sword cut through. I do not know how Zhang Xiaohua did that, the sky was already dark then so I could not see the scene clearly. Do you guys know?"

Madam Qin shook her head, what a joke, the sky was so dark and it was raining as well, even though she had profound inner energy and could see in the dark,

her standard was still far from the level of being able to see through all these obstructions.

Shi Niu smiled bitterly and said, "That it will remain as a riddle, who knows how fierce Zhang Xiaohua actually is?"

Sigh, this person was so straightforward; he actually said what everyone was secretly thinking inside.

At that moment, He Tianshu suddenly spoke out, "Senior brother Shi, was the wound on the old bandit similar to longsword wound except that it looked tinier?"

Shi Niu was surprised, he did not understand the other party's intention for asking about this but he still nodded and said, "Yes, you're right."

He Tianshu's eyes brightened, he asked again, "In that case, was the wound on his throat also smaller than one that would have been made by a normal longsword?"

Shi Niu seemed to understand something and he said, "That's right, junior brother He, you are correct, so what was the weapon used to kill that old bandit?"

He Tianshu smiled bitterly, he recounted the story where the shopkeeper gifted him with a small toy sword accompanying the longsword that he bought from the store, and after he finished his story, everyone scratched their heads like a monk who was freshly shaven. The toy sword had not sharp edge so how could it pierce into the elder's throat, and how could it cut through his palm? Not to forget, the man had also activated the faint golden palm and metal cocoon art so even the normal female disciples were unable to break through his defence, yet why was Zhang Xiaohua able to?

This, was still a riddle that had not been solved.

The day finally broke but the rain continued to fall.

Under the supervision of the Piaomiao disciples, the black clothed men did not come back and everyone could not help but sigh in relief. The night was difficult to endure, and many disciples could not forget the events that occurred then so they were glad that it was finally over.

Ou Yan was still unconscious but her pulse was stable and her condition was considered most fortunate in an unfortunate situation,

Since the villa master had not regained her consciousness, all matters were taken over by Madam Qin. She could not allow them to stay in the same encampment, and their journey had to end at that point if taking into account Ou Yan's condition. Furthermore, with the constant threat of the black clothed men, Ou Peng who was in Pingyang city would never let Ou Yan continue the journey even if the latter wanted to. Lan Dong had also reported the attack to the superiors to gather more reinforcements to bring them back.

When Ou Yan woke up, it was already mid-afternoon and the first thing she asked about was of Zhang Xiaohua's whereabouts. When she heard Madam Qin's explanation, her heart became dark but she also knew that no one was at fault, and it was not feasible to send a search party at that moment, so she decided to wait for their party to regroup with the Piaomiao sect reinforcements before planning the search again.

As for Madam Qin's decision to return to Pingyang city without her approval, Ou Yan did not have any objections in the matter. Ou Peng already opposed to her idea of coming out and she had to argue and persuade the latter many times in order to make this journey a reality. She thought that as a villa master with no feud in Jianghu, what kind of danger she could be in?

Unfortunately, reality told her that people do not need to hurt other people for them to want to hurt you, and anyone who belonged in Jianghu would have to always remember this iron-clad rule.

However, even if Ou Yan squeezed out all her brain juices, she still could not think of which party she had offended.

Chapter 128: Drifting

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Drifting

Ou Yan's party travelled for a few more days on the road and even though the elder who was supposed to welcome them had not reached, the surrounding towns had branches of Lotus escort and Piaomiao sect gathering points and many elite disciples joined her party so Ou Yan's safety was roughly guaranteed. Madam Qin also made an order to request all disciples within the sect to follow the river and look for Zhang Xiaohua's person, and they would be heavily rewarded even if they found his dead body. Hence, apart from disciples who already had a mission, many others followed along the river to search for the missing boy.

However, after seven days' even up till the arrival of second elder Li Jian and fifth elder Liu Qingyang who joined Ou Yan's party, there was still no news of Zhang Xiaohua's whereabouts.

Zhang Xiaohua, was he still alive? Or was he dead?

When Zhang Xiaohua was struck on the chest by the black clothed elder's palm thrust, he fainted immediately on the spot and his body flew into the air and fell into the river. Zhang Xiaohua was already planning to jump into the river when he was carrying Ou Yan on his back, and the place he and the elder fought was also not far from the river. Zhang Xiaohua's body was small so even though the momentum of the palm thrust was not enough to make him fall into the river completely, only half his body was on shore. Coupled with the strong tide caused by the rain, the river swept Zhang Xiaohua's legs almost immediately and his body was dunked into the water so it was long gone by the time He Tianshu went over to look for him.

It could also be considered as Zhang Xiaohua's fortune because if the black clothed elder was slightly stronger, Zhang Xiaohua would have dropped directly into the middle of the river and there was a high chance that he would sink under and drown. When he was washed away later on, his legs were carried off by the current first so his upper half including his head was above the surface of the water. If not, Zhang Xiaohua would have drowned to death even if the black clothed elder's strike did not kill him on the spot.

Zhang Xiaohua who had lost all senses was naturally relaxed and his body floated easily on the river. At that moment, it struck midnight and the unconscious Zhang Xiaohua went back again into a brilliant flashing dream, although one could not be sure if he was conscious enough to see the lights.

Within the darkness of the night, Zhang Xiaohua's body floated on the water and went straight downstream for three thousand "chi". However, Zhang Xiaohua did not drift like a normal person, when a person drops into the water, he would float for a while before sinking into the water or being washed ashore soon after, and this was what Madam Qin and the others expected as well which was why they called the other disciples to search around the river. However, Zhang Xiaohua was different, whether it was due to his small and light body or because of the dream with flashing lights, Zhang Xiaohua's body continued to stay afloat while the small sword his left hand was still gripping on to did not seemed to be as heavy as it was before. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua's body was like a piece of driftwood and it moved downstream as fast as the river's current could carry him.

*TN: 1 chi = 33cm or 13 inches.

Thus, when He Tianshu sent people to search for him again on the second day, Zhang Xiaohua was already washed off to someplace they would never expect, and when Lan Dong sent people to investigate the area they suspected Zhang Xiaohua to be at, this "area" was already far away from where Zhang Xiaohua actually was.

When the next day came, the rain continued to fall and the river current remained strong so Zhang Xiaohua continued to float on the river and was washed off to who knew where.

When it was close to midnight again, Zhang Xiaohua finally drifted to a river bend although one could not guess how far Zhang Xiaohua had travelled from his original position.

There was a simple grass hut on the side of the river bend which was surrounded by a fence. There also seemed to be a few wooden platforms that extended into the river from the grass hut, and a young girl about ten years of age was currently sitting over there holding a fishing rod with one hand pressed on her cheeks while her eyes looked expressionlessly at the beyond. The girl was wearing a light yellow dress and looked very tidy, her ebony black hair was tied up with a handkerchief and swung loosely at the back of her head. The girl's face was the shape of an oval duck's egg, her eyes were large and the creases were small, her skin was fair and there was a red beauty mark at the corner of her mouth. Even though she was not very pretty, the clear pupils in her eyes and slight rise in her eyebrows hinted an overbearing disposition.

The girl's age was young and she had yet to reached the maturity of spring, so why was there such a frown on her face?

At that moment, the fishing rod in the girl's seemed to have caught something large as the line continued to move outwards, but the girl did not notice all these. Suddenly, a kind voice appeared from the grass hut and it said, "Silly child, you did not pull your fishing rod up even when you caught a fish, now your rod is about to be pulled away."

The girl was startled from her daydream and she hurriedly gripped onto the fishing rod that was about to leave her hands, and when she raised her head to look at the river, she exclaimed, "Master, it's a dead person."

"Oh?" the voice seemed to be surprised and a kind looking old lady walked out of the grass hut wearing a clean dress the colour of a pure white moon with a longsword hung at her waist.

When the old lady inspected the scene when she walked onto the platform, wasn't it the unconscious Zhang Xiaohua who was at the other end of the line?

The young girl looked at Zhang Xiaohua's "body" and said in a sad tone, "The poor child, he seemed roughly my age and yet his corpse was washed into the river like this. His family who could not find him must be feeling very sad."

As the girl talked, her heart seemed to be stirred by something and it was made obvious by the expression on her face.

The master looked at the “corpse” in the water and said, “In that case, let’s pull it out of the water first. Even though we do not know where he came from, and the rain was very heavy last night so the river had grown by quite a bit so it will be hard to find where he came from, it is still better than leaving him in the waters and letting the fishes feed on him.”

The girls’ sad expression did not soften, she merely nodded and used some force to pull the fishing rod and when Zhang Xiaohua was pulled to ashore and near enough to the master, the master extended her hand and tugged Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulder. Fortunately, the platform on the water was not too high and the water level had risen quite a lot so she managed to grab him barely.

When the master grabbed onto Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulders and was about to pull him ashore, her expression suddenly turned joyful and she called out, “He’s still alive.”

Upon hearing this, the girl became overjoyed and went over to help but her body was small and her strength was weak, so how much help was she able to provide? Furthermore, Zhang Xiaohua’s body was not heavy so the master only needed a pull to bring him up from the river, except she had to be more careful with the girl beside her.

When the master saw the girl tried to help, she smiled and said, “Go boil some water and make some ginger soup. We do not know how long this child had been in the river for so he might have caught a chill, so some ginger soup will help him to combat the chill.”

Upon hearing this, the girl jumped and ran off, the wrinkle between her brows softened by much as well.

The master brought Zhang Xiaohua into the grass hut and changed him out of his wet clothes before covering him in thick blankets and checked his pulse. When her inner energy circulated in his body, her expression became more solemn.

At that moment, she saw the small sword that Zhang Xiaohua was still gripping tightly to even when near death and she tried to pull it out to inspect it.

However, his grip did not break so she slipped his left hand with the sword into the blanket.

When the girl entered the grass hut with a bowl in her hands, the master was still frowning as though she was deep in thought, and the girl asked carefully, “Master, what is the matter? Can he be saved?”

When the master saw the girl’s concern, she explained, “His body is not used to the water, and he also suffered severe injuries before being pushed into the river.”

When the girl heard this, she became even sadder and said, “His is only about my age so what kind of person could he offend? It must have been an evil person who hurt him, isn’t master a martial art expert, you must definitely save him.”

When she heard the girl’s words, the master could not help but feel secretly guilty, she had been in Jianghu for too long and her thoughts have become complicated and actually thought that this child could have been an evil person. Without the girl’s reminder, how could she assume that a ten plus year old child could be a dangerous and evil person?

Since this was the case, how could she not extend her hand to help?

Thus, the master instructed the little girl to bring a wooden pot over to the bed side, then supported Zhang Xiaohua into a sitting position before moving behind him and placing her two palm onto his back. She circulated the qi which was accumulated using her sect’s unique injury healing cultivation method to help Zhang Xiaohua recover from the wound caused by the faint golden palm.

Not long later, Zhang Xiaohua’s face turned rosier and beads of sweat appeared on his head. The master’s right palm pulled back slightly and immediately thrust itself forcefully onto Zhang Xiaohua’s shoulder causing the latter’s mouth to open and large amounts of fresh blood to spurt from it and into the wooden pot. There were large amounts of black coagulated blood among the fresh red blood in the bowl.

Seeing that Zhang Xiaohua had spitted out the pieces of blood, the master heaved a sigh in relief and retracted both palms before carefully placing Zhang Xiaohua back onto the bed. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua’s face had turned more rosier and his breathing was more stable, there were many tiny beads of

perspiration on his face and he seemed more alive overall compared to before.

The girl quickly took the wooden bowl out and poured the contents into the river before returning into the room and asked carefully, “Master, has he been treated then?”

The master smiled and said, “How could it be so simple? I only expelled the pieces of blood that blocked his circulation from his body. He had never trained in inner energy before so his meridians are all clogged and treatment that requires the use of such meridians are not as effective. The best treatment for him is to use medicine, but I am not as capable as a physician and where can we find one in the desolate mountains? The nearest city is also quite a distance and we would need to use qinggong to reach there, yet his body is still so weak so how can he endure the journey? I’m afraid he would lose his life before reaching the town.”

The girl frowned and said, “So what should we do?”

The master continued, “We do not know which bandit had hurt this child to have used such devious means, he would have lost his life if his organs had moved slightly more or his heart was hurt a little more, not to mention being pushed into the river. Now that he is resting on the bed, his body should start to recover as long as his organs do not incur any further injuries. I still have some beads of medicines which I will let him consume later, perhaps it will be effective. We can only let him rest now and leave it to fate to see how much he can recover.”

The girl seemed to understand and she nodded her head slightly before turning to the ginger soup that was already beginning to cool and asked, “Do we still need to feed him this?”

The master smiled and said, “That is not necessary, I thought that he was cold from the excess water and ginger soup can help to combat the chill, but now that we learn that he has severe internal injury, wouldn’t giving something as stimulating as this cost him his life? It will be better to switch it for some normal water, and I will feed him some medicine later.”

The girl followed her instructions and went to take some water while the master retrieved a white bottle from her bosom and opened it carefully. She

took out a black coloured pill the size of a thumb and positioned it between Zhang Xiaohua's teeth before forcing it into his mouth and using the water to wash it down. The master's confidence rose to another level when she saw Zhang Xiaohua's throat made the motion of swallowing the pill down.

The arrival of Zhang Xiaohua did not make any drastic changes to the lives of the master and girl. The master would go out early in the morning and return late at night, except that she would monitor Zhang Xiaohua's condition when she reached back and feed him another pill. The girl would stay in the grass hut and look left and right, but she would be out most of the times sitting beside the river with the fishing rod with her thoughts filled with fishing.

Who knew how much it had rain for the past few days so the river was always rapid every day. However, there was nothing in the river and her fishing would not yield any harvest.

After a few more days, the weather started to turn cold to signal the arrival of winter. The girl disliked the cold, she would only think of staying the grass hut beside the stove. The master's initial peaceful countenance became more and more irritable and her brows would wrinkle every so often as though she was facing a huge obstacle.

The girl noticed the change in her master's mood and wanted to ask but she did not know where to begin.

During that particular night after the master fed Zhang Xiaohua the last pill, the girl asked, "Master, you have finished all your pills, how are you going to feed him tomorrow?"

The master felt Zhang Xiaohua's pulse and inserted some inner energy into his body to check his condition before saying, "There are only these many pills, it will have some effect if they are effective in treating his illness. Otherwise, anymore would be useless."

The girl was still slightly worried and she said, "So how is he now? Is it effective? Don't make us bury him after we fished him from the river, it will be so unworthy of our efforts."

The master smiled and said, "When saving someone, the result is not as important as the intention. Anyway, you don't need to worry too much, this

child's recovery is much faster than I expected so keeping his life should not be a problem, only is that I still do not know when he will wake up. It cannot go on like this, I still need to return to the sect before the New Year and you will have to follow me since I can't keep you here in the mountains. Should we carry him along with us if he still doesn't wake up by then?"

The girls smiled and said, "Then let's bring him with us. Since you accept me as a disciple, you can accept him as one too."

The master patted her head and said, "You say it as if it was so easy. Our sect only accepts female disciples, and even if we have male disciples, they would be outer disciples. Furthermore, I do not plan to accept a male disciple."

The girl replied, "In that case, we can only bring him along to the nearest town before letting fate decide his future."

The master said, "You don't need to try and think of anything behind my back. Not to mention bringing him to the town, even if we could carry him to town in this condition, he will not likely survive by himself."

The girl blinked her eyes and said, "In that case, perhaps he will recover after you finish your task?"

The master smiled and said, "Don't talk about perhaps, the place I am looking for....." She suddenly realized the girl's intention when she spoke up to here, she laughed bitterly and scolded, "You rascal, just say it directly if you want to know, don't beat about the bush. However, this matter is quite sensitive so you are not allowed to know it for now. You must also not say anything if someone else asks you about it, understand?"

The girl answered in a tone that suggested that she did not agree, "I understand, master, I will keep your secret for you since you say so."

The master could tell that the girl was not serious and she continued, "For my task, it seems that I will not be able to succeed this time round as well. However, I was already mentally prepared to continue in the future. We can wait a few more days; I think we can wait a little longer before returning to the sect from the time now."

The girl pursed her lips and said, "I will listen to master since I have nowhere

else to go.”

The master stroke her head and said lovingly, “It is alright, you will have a place to belong to in the future.”

Two days later before dawn, just as the rising sun was lighting up the sky with its brilliant rays, the Zhang Xiaohua who had been unconscious all these while in the grass hut opened his eyes, and a flashing light appeared within his black pupils.

When Zhang Xiaohua looked at the unfamiliar grass hut in his surroundings, he felt strange but then recalled the events few days ago and guessed roughly what happened. He tried to sit up but could only raise his chest slightly before feeling an unbearable pain and yelped out involuntarily before lying back onto the bed. Thus, he turned his head around and studied his surroundings. Zhang Xiaohua opened his mouth and tried to call for someone but just as he was about to speak, the pain in his chest reappeared so he could not shout and only ask softly, “Is there anyone?”

Who could hear his voice which was as soft as a cat’s mew?

Fortunately, Zhang Xiaohua’s arms could still move and when he wanted to use it, he realized that his left hand was still gripping onto the small sword tightly. Zhang Xiaohua felt extremely emotional as he brought the small sword to in front of his eyes with great difficulty; he looked at the familiar toy and the suspicion in his heart rose up again, what was this thing? Was it really a toy? He could understand if it could pierce through a rock or tree during his normal practice, but the black clothed elder’s martial arts could prevent even the Piaomiao disciple’s longsword for piercing through yet Zhang Xiaohua’s small sword could easily cut into his flesh, it was really out of his expectations. Furthermore, the sword did not have any sharp edge.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was pondering, he suddenly heard a clear ringing voice, “You are awake?”

Zhang Xiaohua turned around to look, there was a girl whose stature was similar to his standing at the door, her face was oval like a duck egg and was slightly red from the chill, her eyes were large and there was currently an expression of joy in them, while a fishing rod was in her hands. Zhang Xiaohua

felt a wave of confusion, was this child from a fisherman's household? Was she going to fish early in the morning for a living? However, even though her appearance was not very beautiful, there was still a proud disposition that could not be hidden, and which fisherman's child would be like that?

Indeed, the girl put down her fishing rod hurriedly and said, "Wait here, I will go tell the master right away."

After finishing her sentence, she turned around and left in a flash, the ebony black hair fluttered in the wind leaving behind a beautiful view.

Not long later, the master walked over quickly and said in a joy and relieved tone, "Thank the heavens for watching over you, you have finally woken up. Let me check your pulse first."

After finishing her sentence, she walked to Zhang Xiaohua's bed and held up his wrist before sending another stream of qi into his body. She said, "Not bad, child, your recovery has been quite good. You have managed to recover almost halfway in these ten plus days, your body is actually much better than the average person and is fuller with vitality. Sigh, it is so nice to be young and recover so soon from injuries."

Chapter 129: First meeting

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

This marks the Last Chapter of the day.

First meeting

When Zhang Xiaohua heard that he had been unconscious for over ten days, his first thought was that they had landed in big trouble. The events of the rainy night were still fresh on his mind, he wondered how Ou Yan and the others were doing, and if the black clothed was killed by him, and whether the new arrivals belonged to Piaomiao sect's reinforcements. If Ou Yan managed to escape death, she should be looking for him so far had their search efforts been advancing during these days that he was unconscious.

Even though Zhang Xiaohua wanted to ask the master where he was, he did not know long he had been in the river and how far the river had carried him, so what was the use of asking anyway?

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua tried to concentrate and looked at the master, he said in a small voice, "Many thanks for master's grace in saving my life."

The master stroke his forehead and smiled, "This child is quite sensible. If you want to thank your saviour, you will have to thanks this lass first, I do not know where you would be carried off to if she had not fished you up."

"Fish me up?" Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he immediately thought back to the fishing rod the girl was holding on to and realized what must have happened. He turned to the girl and said sincerely in a soft voice, "In that case, many thanks for this lady's grace in saving my life."

The girl smiled lightly and said, "My pleasure, I only spotted you anyway. The person who pulled you out of the river and fed you medicine was my master, I do not dare to take her credit."

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a while and said, “No matter what, I am still grateful to master and this lady’s kindness.”

The master saw that Zhang Xiaohua was tired after speaking and she said, “Alright, you should slowly heal up now that you have woken up. Go back to sleep first, these words can be said in the future, you don’t need to thank us now.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded slightly when he heard her instructions, he already felt exhausted after saying those few sentences and wanted to sleep so he followed her instructions and closed his eyes. Soon after, he fell asleep again.

When Zhang Xiaohua woke up again, it was already night-time and with the girl’s help, Zhang Xiaohua managed to swallow some food and recovered some spirit after then.

Not long later, the master returned and she felt joy when she saw that Zhang Xiaohua awake and in good spirits.

The master supported Zhang Xiaohua to sit up and placed the blankets behind his back before positioning him so that the three people could have a talk comfortably.

The master was naturally curious about Zhang Xiaohua’s origins, Zhang Xiaohua pondered a while before saying, “Master, my name is Zhang Xiaohua, and I help to plant herbs in a mountain villa. When I was following the villa master and her party to the south to do some task, we were ambushed by people in the night and I was thrown into the river by a black clothed elder. As for which mountain villa I came from, the villa master’s name and the time we left the mountain villa, I was instructed not to reveal them before we left on the trip. I currently do not know where the rest are at, but I think it is still best to follow what they say and not tell the master all these things, are you okay with that?”

The master also did not have the intention to inquire too deeply, she was only casually asking the latter and when she saw how honest and reliable Zhang Xiaohua was to his word, her heart felt joy. After travelling in the Jianghu for so long, she had not seen such pure and innocent children for so long so the master naturally did not make things difficult for Zhang Xiaohua. Just as the master was

about to reply, the girl beside her snorted in laughter before saying, “Xiaohua, why is your name so pretty like a girl? Xiaohua, Xiaohua, it reminds me of the little white flowers at the mountain top.”

This was the second time Zhang Xiaohua heard his name being made fun of but when he saw how happy and innocent the girl’s smile was, he replied weakly, “My parents gave me the name and I think it is fine as well. So what is your name?”

The question was quite ordinary but the girl’s face turned as white as sheet when she heard it.

The girl bit her lips and held back her tears and under the pitiful gaze of her master, she said, “I do not know what my name is, I seemed to have forgotten some things in the past. Sometimes I feel like I remember them, but I would forget them later, and my past life would feel like it was all a dream so I am not certain of anything.”

The master sighed and said, “I met her during my time in the desolate mountains, and she was also unconscious at that time. By the time she woke up, her memories had already left and she could not even recall what her name was.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “The master is such a kind person, you saved this little sister and me in one breath and have accumulated so much good karma in one breath. Oh right, little sister, since the past seemed like a dream, you can be said to have awoken from your dream and can start everything afresh so you should be happy instead. If you don’t remember your new name, you can get yourself a new name. Since it doesn’t matter to me if you are in a dream or not, why don’t I call you Meng (dream)?”

Upon listening his words, the girl’s eyes brightened and she laughed, “Meng, not bad, life is like a dream and I am not exception. I shall be called Meng from henceforth, haha, thank you Zhang Xiaohua.”

The master clapped her hands and said, “Not bad at all, Zhang Xiaohua, you sound like a learned person so why did you end up working in the herb fields?”

Zhang Xiaohua said in an embarrassed tone, “My family is poor and I was not very smart when I was young so my father did not let me read much books. I

have read several books recently so I know more things now, and since little Meng saved my life, this name can be counted as kind fate between us.”

Zhang Xiaohua then said sheepishly, “May I also know master’s name so that I can repay you in the future?”

The master smiled happily and said, “It is fine to tell you since you do not belong to Jianghu as well. However, for certain reasons, you can just remember me as Jing Xuan. As for the future, if it best to keep this name to yourself and not tell anyone that you know me.”

Zhang Xiaohua understood the severity of the situation immediately and said, “I understand, master Jing Xuan. Everyone has their own untold secrets so we should give each other some space. I am already happy since master did not blame me from withholding some things, so I would naturally do the same to master’s matters as well.”

Master Jing Xuan smiled and said, “Zhang Xiaohua’s words are very true. As the saying goes, take a step back and one can see the vast blue sky, so what use is there in pursuing more knowledge of the other person? If we truly know each other, how much more bloodshed would there be in Jianghu? Unfortunately, Jianghu is a place where fist rules and the harder your fist is, the more reason you carry no matter what secrets the other party holds on to. Zhang Xiaohua, I hope that you can remember these words I said today when you grow up and follow them.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied earnestly, “I understand, master, I will work hard to do so.”

The three people chatter for a little longer before master Jing Xuan felt that Zhang Xiaohua grew fatigued and she pulled little Meng out to let him rest.

For the next few days, master Jing Xuan would leave early in the morning and return late at night, while Zhang Xiaohua’s injuries recovered at a rapid pace. His recovery made master Jing Xuan puzzled, she had personally examined Zhang Xiaohua’s conditions and knew how severe it was, so he should have taken a few months to recover from her own calculations. Thus, she had been pondering about the matter, but now that Zhang Xiaohua had recovered in these ten days as much as an ordinary person would in two months, could it be that her

medicine was so effective and Zhang Xiaohua's young age allowed him to absorb the full efficacy of the medicine?

Seeing the master's puzzled expression, Zhang Xiaohua thought back to his eldest brother's injured period. Didn't Zhang Xiaolong recover quickly as well from his internal injuries previously? At that time, everyone thought that it was due to the spring water, but now that he had been out of his household and not drunk the spring water for almost a year, then could it be that because he had drunk the spring water previously? It might be possible for the spring water to heal internal injuries, but it would be suspected by other people if he said that it was the cause of his quick recovery, and thus, Zhang Xiaohua decided not to bring up the matter.

Actually, the reason why Zhang Xiaohua was unconscious for ten days was because his body was healing itself during this time, and the longer he stayed unconscious the more his body would recover. Now that he had woken up, his injuries were naturally healed for most part, but Zhang Xiaohua and the master would not know all these. Nevertheless, knowing and not knowing made no difference and Zhang Xiaohua could still pass his day happily even in ignorance.

On that day, Zhang Xiaohua and Little Meng were alone in the grass hut as usual. Zhang Xiaohua could already get off his bed and walk, he took slow and small steps to the door of the grass hut where the bright sun could reach and warm him. Little Meng did not go fishing, she left her fishing rod at a side and was also seated down beside Zhang Xiaohua. She asked, "Elder brother Xiaohua, where is your home? What kind of people is in your household? Can you describe it to me? I will definitely keep it a secret and not tell anyone what you say."

Zhang Xiaohua looked at little Meng's face which was like jade in the sunlight, he smiled and said, "I can talk about this, there is no need for secrecy. The household I belong to is located in Guo village which is a village situated near Lu town. However, you cannot ask me where Lu town is because I have never seen a map before, so I won't be able to pinpoint it to you. There is currently my father, mother, eldest brother and his wife at home, while I and my second brother went out to search for a living. I used to have a grandmother who would treat me very well but she passed away last year." When Zhang Xiaohua mentioned his

grandmother, his mind became flooded with many past memories, and thus, he began to talk of when he first reclaimed his own plot of land to the well construction project, and then about the events during the New Year when his eldest brother saved Liu Qing from the bullies. He continued to share about the mountain bandits who appeared during his eldest brother's wedding, his grandmother's funeral, and all these talk took up the entire morning. Near the end, Zhang Xiaohua was crying hurtfully while tears also appeared in little Meng's eyes as she listened to his stories and sympathized with the series of misfortunes that Zhang Xiaohua's household encountered.

Little Meng looked at Zhang Xiaohua enviously and said, "Elder brother Xiaohua, you have a harmonious and loving family so I am really jealous of you. I do not know where my family is, and I have no idea on where to find them."

Zhang Xiaohua comforted her, "Everyone has a family and you are no exception. Perhaps you do not know where they are now, but that doesn't mean that your family doesn't exist. I believe that you will be able to return to your family and meet your own father and mother. Furthermore, doesn't master Jing Xuan treat you very well like a real mother would?"

Little Meng smiled and said, "Xiaohua you are absolutely right, I definitely have a home and like you, there will definitely be many stories from home to share as well. My family will also be very harmonious and loving, and after I regain my memories again, I will share my stories with you, okay?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled back, he said, "No problem, little Meng, I will wait for that day to come. Furthermore, if there is a chance in the future, I will invite you to our Guo village, and my father and mother, eldest brother and sister in law will definitely like you."

Little Meng smiled again, her smile was like a flower as time has worn away her cold exterior from the past. Perhaps this was the ten plus years old girl's true personality, and little Meng wanted to extend her hand to hold the other youth who was currently recovering from his injuries but when she extended it halfway, she remembered that it was not a suitable game for her age and her face immediately flushed and she retracted her little hand quickly.

The youth in front of her had very ordinary features and his face was even

quite pallid from the injuries he sustained. However, he was her first playmate for as far as she could remember, and even though this playmate was bedridden most of the time, the family he shared with her gave her hope of a beautiful family that she could reunite with in the future. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua's family, Zhang Xiaohua himself, and Zhang Xiaohua's life all carved themselves deeply into little Meng's impression.

Master Jing Xuan gave her the protection of an elder, but Zhang Xiaohua gave her the joy of having a peer beside her.

Could this, perhaps be the so called "fate"?

The weather was sunny and the river was flowing smoothly, perhaps there were countless joyful and unfortunate events that happened every day in this huge world. However, the moment on that particular day belonged to the young boy and girl who were sitting at the door of the grass hut, they had mutual support and trust, and as a result, they had hopes and expectations for the future.

On the night of the same day, master Jing Xuan returned especially late and looked more tired than usual. However, Zhang Xiaohua and little Meng were naturally not inquisitive so they did not ask her any questions.

On the next day, master Jing Xuan did not leave in the morning, instead, she called Zhang Xiaohua and little Meng into the main room.

Zhang Xiaohua had a sort of premonition.

Indeed, the first thing master Jing Xuan did was examine Zhang Xiaohua's condition, she then said, "Zhang Xiaohua, your injuries have stabilized and there should not be any large problems in the future, you only need to rest sufficiently from now on."

Zhang Xiaohua quickly expressed his gratitude, "This is thanks to master's effort, many thanks to you."

Master Jing Xuan smiled and said, "Why so courteous, we have been living together for ten plus days and I have treated you like my own nephew so there is no need for words of thanks. However, the year is ending soon and I will not be able to stay here for long. I shall set off on a journey to return to my sect

tomorrow, and little Meng will be following me. What about you, do you have any plans?”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and said, “Master, what do you think I should do?”

Master Jing Xuan replied, “Your injuries are not too serious so you can still follow us on our trip. Even if your condition suddenly changes for the worse, I will be around so there should not be anything too serious. I can put you in the nearest town where you can decide on what you want to do, and it will be fine whether you recuperate in the town for a longer while or make plans to return to your own place.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “In that case, master, I would like to ask what plans you have for little Meng?”

Master Jing Xuan broke into a laugh and she said, “About little Meng, I plan to bring her back to the sect first. Although her aptitude is average and her age is slightly too big for her to train in martial arts, it should not be difficult for her to be accepted with my identity. Even if she will not be able to become some martial arts expert, it will still be possible for her to learn some self-defence and live a stable life ahead.”

Little Meng had also been worrying about her future but she was naturally shy or too lazy to ask her master. Now that Zhang Xiaohua had asked in her stead, and master Jing Xuan had planned her future quite comprehensively for her, her eyes could not help but turn red as she walked to the master’s front and pulled her sleeves, saying, “Master, thank you.”

Master Jing Xuan stroke little Meng’s head lovingly and said, “Little Meng, meeting you can be counted as my fate, and seeing you now reminds me of my own youth. Since I have some abilities to take care of you, I will definitely be willing to help you. In this dark Jianghu world where traps and bloodshed abound, there still exists some kindness within.”

Little Meng nodded her head even though she seemed not to understand.

Upon listening, Zhang Xiaohua felt that it was too good and he said, “Master, since you are willing to accept a disciple, why not accept two and bring me into your sect as well?”

Master Jing Xuan smiled and said, “Even though our sect has some male disciples, we do not train them personally and these male disciples are only outer disciples. I cannot accept male disciples myself, but I can recommend someone to you if you wish to follow me back. However, your age is too old and have already passed the best period for learning martial arts so I doubt you can accomplish much in martial arts anymore.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s heart cooled down again, why do all these experts talk of the same logic? Forget it, when he thought back to Ou Yan’s promise, he said in an unenthusiastic tone, “I only wanted master to teach me personally. If it is someone else, I rather not follow him.”

Master Jing Xuan said, “You little child, to join our sect even as an outer disciple would not be easy.” However, she did not say the name of her sect and since she was unwilling to force Zhang Xiaohua, she did not say much else.

Zhang Xiaohua continued to say, “Master, after thinking about this, I am also not willing to follow you to the nearest town. Like you said, there are still some problems with my injuries and if something happened, it would interrupt your plans during your trip. Secondly, just bringing me along would affect your journey back to your sect. Instead, I might as well rest here and since it is close to the river, my companions might continue to search and pass by this area a few days later. If I leave with you, then wouldn’t I miss meeting them?”

Master Jing Xuan reflected quietly for a moment before saying, “Zhang Xiaohua, your words are reasonable and no matter what, moving is less safe than resting here so you might as well rest here. The surroundings are safe and there is enough food for you to last even after the new year, oh right, I will give you directions to nearest town later on so that you don’t get lost if you go by yourself.”

After saying what she wanted to say, master Jing Xuan then explained the route from the grass hut to Ji town carefully and in detail before taking out some coins from her bosom and leaving them to Zhang Xiaohua. She then brought little Meng aside and began to pack their things.

Perhaps because this was the last time he had with master Jing Xuan and little Meng, Zhang Xiaohua felt that time passed faster and before he realized it, it

already became night and the bright red sun was hanging on the mountains. Zhang Xiaohua pressed his hands on his cheeks and sat alone beside the river while little Meng walked over stealthily.

Little Meng followed Zhang Xiaohua as she sat beside the river but her hands were behind her back. She looked at the sun from afar and asked, “What are you thinking of?”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “I am thinking how the ancient sayings are right, that the sunset is a magnificent sight but like all good times, it is always short lived.”

Little Meng also felt dejected and she said, “It is nice because it is short. If the time is long, it will lose all its flavour.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Little Meng is right, we have only known each other for ten days and naturally feel good about each other. If it were ten years, how would we feel about each other then?”

Little Meng’s face was slightly red, she was sucked into Zhang Xiaohua’s words unintentionally and pondered deeply, when would she see the short-lived sunset again?

Chapter 130: Separation

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Separation

Actually, little Meng had thought too far ahead, Zhang Xiaohua was only saying what he felt at the moment and he never had a female friend to play with since young. These ten days were when his body was weakest since his whole life, and there was suddenly a girl of similar age to accompany him to pass the time and chat idly so he naturally wondered how it would be if they had stayed together for a longer time. Hence, he never thought about how the other party would interpret the words, and even less about the feeling of the so called “first love”.

Zhang Xiaohua continued, “To be able to be saved by the two of you in the remote area can be counted as fate, however, who knows when we will meet again? From master Jing Xuan’s meaning, you must work hard to learn martial arts and once you achieve some accomplishments and wander around Jianghu as a heroine, then perhaps we can meet each other again.”

Little Meng pondered slightly and said, “Elder brother Xiaohua, I still do not know which sect our master is from so can you tell me where you are from?”

Zhang Xiaohua was quiet for a while, he then replied, “I have not joined any sect yet, and have only learnt some incomplete fist martial arts. I have told you everything else I could say, and regarding other matters, it might endanger the safety of some people so it is better kept to myself.”

Sigh, poor Zhang Xiaohua, how could he not know a girl’s heart? Can’t you say something else instead?

However, his response that day made little Meng feel that he was different from other people.

Little Meng nodded her head and said, “I know that elder brother Xiaohua is from Lu town and lives in Guo village, that is enough for me.”

She then bit her lips and her hands shifted uncomfortably behind her back before she raised them to the front and said to Zhang Xiaohua in an uncertain tone, “Elder brother Xiaohua, I do not know when we can meet again after we separate today. This is something I found in my bag that I would carry around wherever I go. I don’t remember its origins, but it seemed quite close to me so I guessed that it is something I used to own. I am giving it to you today as a memento.”

Zhang Xiaohua squinted his eyes carefully and saw her took out a hairpin that looked like a jade catkin. He could not help but feel surprised; he quickly waved his hands and said, “How do I dare to accept such a precious item?”

Little Meng replied in mock anger, “What is so precious about this? Is it because it is expensive? Even if it is worth a lot of money, it will still be useless if I do not use it and leave it lying around. Since it is useless to me, won’t it be better if I give it to someone who will cherish it more? If you don’t want it, I would just throw it into the river instead.”

After finishing her sentence, she motioned a throw and when Zhang Xiaohua saw her intentions, he quickly replied, “Don’t throw it, I will keep it alright.” He quickly took it away and thought secretly, “This thing is worth four to five coins, it will be such a waste to throw it into the river.”

How would little Meng know what he was thinking, she just beamed happily when Zhang Xiaohua took the hairpin from her.

However, following this, Zhang Xiaohua fumbled around his body before taking out the small sword embarrassingly and passing it to little Meng. Little Meng was confused, she stuck out her hand to receive the sword but it was unexpectedly much heavier and she almost dropped it on the floor. Little Meng exerted more force before she could carry it in her hands, and she then heard Zhang Xiaohua said, “As the saying goes, one must return a gift with another, I have searched my entire body but this is the only thing I could find, how about I give it to you as a memento?”

Little Meng did not know whether to laugh or cry when she saw the strangely

heavy, black and dull object, she said, “Such a precious (made of two words heavy and precious) object, how could I receive it?” The word “heavy” was emphasized especially! Zhang Xiaohua scratched his head and shrugged his shoulders, he said, “But I only have this thing in my possession.”

Little Meng saw his sincere gaze and her eyes rolled, she smiled gleefully and said, “Then I will accept this gift. However, this gift is too heavy and will be inconvenient to carry during the trip, how about if you keep it for me first?”

After finishing her sentence, she passed the small sword back to Zhang Xiaohua with great difficulty. Zhang Xiaohua tilted his head and pondered for a while before extending his hand to receive it back. He said, “In that case, I will do as we promised and hold on to this thing for now, but it will belong to you.”

Little Meng nodded her head as she smiled.

When Zhang Xiaohua put the sword back into his breast, he still felt uncomfortable with the exchange and pondered for another moment before slapping his forehead and saying, “I got it.”

He then took out the hairpin and removed a piece of it to pass to little Meng. He said, “Since you gave me this hairpin, then it can be considered mine so I can give you a portion of it. What do you think if we each hold a piece?”

When little Meng heard his words, her face became so flushed that she almost bled, she could neither accept nor not except the hair pin that Zhang Xiaohua was offering her. In the beginning, she only wanted to give a small gift for remembrance to her first and only playmate, but this Zhang Xiaohua seemed to have misunderstood something and wanted both of them to each hold a piece of the hairpin, what did that represent?! What could he mean? Was Zhang Xiaohua hinting at something? Should she accept it or not? Should she explain it to him? Even though she had good feelings towards the latter, surely it was not up to that stage!

Thus, the choice to accept or reject the object became a problem!

However, Zhang Xiaohua’s following words removed her dilemma, he said, “This hairpin would cost at least four coins, I will feel safer if I keep only half of it which is about two coins worth.”

The blush on little Meng's face faded immediately and she stared at Zhang Xiaohua severely. She stomped her feet, snatched the piece of hairpin in Zhang Xiaohua's hands and said angrily, "Feel safe you idiot."

She turned around and ran into the grass hut after finishing her sentence.

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned, he asked in confusion, "Weren't we still good just now? I only wanted to return you half of the hairpin, why did her expression change so much?"

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the sky and said, "It doesn't seem to be raining any time soon, why did she run back so hurriedly? There is no need to keep the clothes at all."

Little Meng's face had a cold and distant expression all the way up till night, she did not smile at the Zhang Xiaohua who was still confused about how he had offended the former.

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua found a small cloth bundle beside his bed and when woke up. He opened it and saw a few broken silvers; Zhang Xiaohua could not help but feel a wave of warmth wash over him but at the same time, he felt like there was something not right. Thus, he took the cloth bundle in his hands and went out hurriedly, and indeed, the house was empty. Master Jing Xuan and little Meng had left early in the morning before dawn.

Zhang Xiaohua clutched onto the cloth bundle which was still slightly warm and he understood in his heart that master Jing Xuan was a good person. She had given him some coins on the previous day, but just as she was about to leave, she became afraid that it was not enough so she gave more. Zhang Xiaohua decided that he would repay the other party when he met her in the future.

However, he did not notice that the cloth used to make the bundle was little Meng's handkerchief! That was normal, however, as this servant's eyes would be drawn to the money even when it was placed with other things.

Zhang Xiaohua stood at the entrance of the grass hut and spaced out for a moment before recollecting himself and returning inside. The master must have gone into this room before she left to bade farewell but because he could not wake up, she must have felt puzzled but thought that it was fine anyway and

thus left stealthily. In that way, they would still have good memories of each other, and neither party would cry or feel too hurt.

At that moment several tens of li away, a person was thinking, “Why does this Zhang Xiaohua sleep like a pig and cannot be woken up no matter what?”

The grass hut which usually had three inhabitants was suddenly left with only one so Zhang Xiaohua’s loneliness grew by a large extent. During the previous period of time, little Meng was always by his side to chat and even though master Jing Xuan was not around often, she could come back in the evening so Zhang Xiaohua could see her regularly. Now that he was alone in the grass hut, every moment became boring and lonely to him.

Ever since Zhang Xiaohua learnt to read, he would always use books to pass his free time, but how would this simple grass hut have a collection of books for him to read?

Thus, he went back to the empty space in front of the grass hut. He initially wanted to pull a few stances and practice his dipper heavenly fist but after performing a few stances, he felt a surge of pain in his body from the vigorous movements so he could only stop in cold sweat.

What should he do then?

However, Zhang Xiaohua felt another wave of inspiration when he saw the small mountain which was not far from the grass hut.

Even though he had been living in the grass hut for a long period, he had not stepped far out from the hut before so that day was a good day for him to explore his surroundings.

Thus, not long later, Zhang Xiaohua looked around and found a rod inside the grass hut which he could use as a crutch. He held it with his left hand and walked slowly step by step to the mountain behind.

However, just as he crossed the grass hut, he realized that behind the hut was a small hill and given his current injuries, there would be some difficulties for him to cross it. Zhang Xiaohua walked along the side of the hill and indeed, somewhere about the time it takes to boil a teapot ahead was a gentle-sloped path. Zhang Xiaohua checked his surroundings before holding on to his crutch

carefully and climbed up with much difficulties. However, it was a different scene that greeted him when he reached the peak of the hill.

There was a plateau filled with trees, the trees were blown by the winter wind leaving their multiple bare branches and stalks that pointed up to the sky and the ground was full of fallen leaves and weeds. What he saw from the grass hut was only the beginning of the wilderness, and it was only the beginning of the forest, and from his current view, a single glance could tell that the wilderness extended who knew how far.

Zhang Xiaohua walked along the hill for a while before finding a spot he could descend before sliding down from there. The forest was full of fallen leaves which made walking comfortable, Zhang Xiaohua looked at his surroundings as he continued to walk ahead. There were numerous bird sounds that could stir one's heart, and once in a while, there would be the rustle of vegetation when a small animal moved about the tree tops. Zhang Xiaohua listened earnestly, he guessed that they must be squirrels so he ignored them and continued to walk some more. Suddenly, Zhang Xiaohua heard more rustling of the leaves and grass and for a moment, he thought that there was someone who was walking in the same area as him. After listening to the sounds for a while, Zhang Xiaohua realized that it must have been a rabbit that was looking for food for the winter.

Zhang Xiaohua gulped his saliva when he thought of the small animals, life in the grass hut had been simple and meat was scarce among their meals, it had been a long while since he smelled the scent of meat. Sigh, if he could catch a rabbit or something similar, how wonderful it would be?

Except, what about his injury? Zhang Xiaohua looked at the crutch in his hands and extinguished the idea for the moment.

Zhang Xiaohua walked forward for a while longer and then lifted his head to look at the small mountain, it still seemed close from his position. Zhang Xiaohua then realized what the books meant when a man could ride his horse to death to reach the first mountain he saw, if he continued to advance further, perhaps there would be a dead Zhang Xiaohua that day.

So be it, he had only come over for a walk and had no intentions of tiring himself out. He picked up a few dried branches on the floor and turned around

to head back.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua thought of a question, master Jing Xuan would always leave every morning and come back in the night, but in remote place where birds would leave their guano, what was there for her to be busy with? However, the master's qinggong was probably superb and the area she could cover would naturally be far, perhaps she was looking for something in the vicinity? Or perhaps looking for someone?

Maybe because Zhang Xiaohua was preoccupied with the puzzle in his head, or perhaps because he was returning back, Zhang Xiaohua reached the front of the high slope he came from not long later. As he looked at the steep slope, Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and thought, master Jing Xuan definitely has her reasons for whatever she was doing so who was he to worry for her?

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and began to make the climb.

When he reached back at the hut, Zhang Xiaohua's entire body was wet with perspiration but it also felt comfortable, as the saying goes, life lies in exercise, and the sayings do not lie.

The rest of the day was similarly boring, Zhang Xiaohua took the fishing rod that little Meng left behind and thought of going to fish. However, he could not find any suitable bait so he could only learn from little Meng and threw the fishing line into the river, looked at the flowing waters and prayed that a fish would hook itself up.

Perhaps because Zhang Xiaohua's prayers were not sincere enough, it was not heard by the heavens who did not send any fish along his way, so Zhang Xiaohua did not manage to catch anything at all. However, this idle time was passed by Zhang Xiaohua like that.

The weather grew colder with each passing day and a question that Zhang Xiaohua could not solve arose, he remembered being afraid of the chill last winter and would wear warm clothes early in the season. However, when the cold wind blew that year, even though snowflakes had yet to fall, the temperature had already fallen quite low and he was still wearing the travelling clothes from Huanxi mountain villa yet did not feel cold at all. It was a really strange occurrence.

Perhaps this place was already in the south? And the winter will not be as cold as in Guo village?

For the following days when Zhang Xiaohua immersed himself into the fist martial arts, he still could not find an answer to the question, but the problem which he encountered while trying to practice his martial arts naturally solved himself. Zhang Xiaohua was soon able to perform the dipper heavenly fist in its entirety. Speaking of this dipper heavenly fist, it was quite mysterious because despite Zhang Xiaohua's slow speed, a feeling would still appear and circulate around his body as long as he persisted to practice up to the ninth repetition, although the thickness of the feeling differed.

Could this feeling only appear after every ninth repetition?

Actually, apart from the fist martial art, Zhang Xiaohua also tried to practice the sword stance which elder Yu had imparted to him. After all, this sword stance was pivotal in Zhang Xiaohua being able to kill the martial arts expert black clothed elder. Having personally experienced how life-saving the sixteen sword variations were, how could Zhang Xiaohua not try to practice them again?

Unfortunately, the sword martial arts were unlike the fist martial art. Zhang Xiaohua would try to practice for a while but he immediately felt unwell and had to stop. However, it was not as if his attempts were fruitless. When Zhang Xiaohua stopped to rest, his mind would immediately return to the moment when he pierced the black clothed elder's throat. If he had immediately used another sword variation, the palm that almost took his life would not have reached his body. Of course, this was purely his conjecture because without foot movements to supplement his sword stance variations, this sword would never have reached its offensive potential but Zhang Xiaohua would never be able to realize this with his current understanding.

Zhang Xiaohua would practice his fist martial arts each day and slowly tried to perform his sword stances as well. His body seemed to get better with the passing of time, except, there was no news whether in the form of visitors by land or a boat by river. Sometimes, Zhang Xiaohua would feel wonderment on how master Jing Xuan was able to find such a remote spot.

Zhang Xiaohua would occasionally mutter to himself, should he stay or should

he leave? Perhaps he should have left with master Jing Xuan earlier on.

While Zhang Xiaohua was entangled with his thoughts, the first snow of the New Year fell. Actually, Zhang Xiaohua was unsure if it was the New Year, but seeing that snow had arrived, he naturally linked it to the coming of the year and celebrated it as such.

Zhang Xiaohua had also gone to the forest at the back of the grass hut more than once after the first time, and now that there was so much snow, it was the perfect opportunity to go hunting. On the morning of one day, Zhang Xiaohua carried his crutch and went again to the hill behind the grass hut. Everyone seldom break away from a habit after it has formed, and Zhang Xiaohua was no exception as he chose the same path as the very first trip.

When Zhang Xiaohua entered the snow white world, he could not help but feel amazed at the scene of ice and snow before him, and even more so at the many marks of animals in the thick layer of snow on the ground as he thought that he would not return empty handed this time round.

However, just as Zhang Xiaohua was about to enter the forest, he realized that he had made a large estimation error. The snow was so thick, it was either flat like it has just fallen or dotted with many small footprints, so where should he look to trace any rabbits? On this wide expanse, it seemed that the only footprints that were traceable from afar was his own.

Zhang Xiaohua deliberated for a moment before heading in the direction of the small mountain, maybe he could find some animals to hunt from there.

Perhaps because of the snow, Zhang Xiaohua did not hear any bird sounds on his way as they bird were probably sleeping in their nests. Despite Zhang Xiaohua's investigation, he could not find any trace of animals on the snow but he was not surprised, perhaps all the tracks were covered by the snow that was continuing to fall.

After walking for half a bell, the little mountain still looked the same as it was before, but Zhang Xiaohua had steeled his heart this time. He was determined to hunt over at that side and would not return empty handed this time round. However, the crafty rabbits had multiple burrows so how could Zhang Xiaohua who had so little hunting experience find them?

Hence, the greedy Zhang Xiaohua could only walk on the snow to continue his difficult journey.

Chapter 131: Cave

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Cave

After walking on the snow for an entire morning, there were still no traces of animals to be found and it even became more difficult to walk, Zhang Xiaohua would almost slip at times and therefore he could only rely more heavily on his crutch.

The entire world was made of snow and bare branches in the forest, and apart from the “su su” sounds of the snowfall, all one could hear was Zhang Xiaohua’s soft footsteps. In such an environment, one would not be able to tell if he was heading towards north or south, but there was not much difference in the directions to the road-dumb Zhang Xiaohua. He would only raise his gaze to look at the small mountain, but after not doing so for a while, he realized that he had neared the mountain by quite a bit the next time he looked up again.

However, this boy named Zhang was uninterested in the small mountain, he only cared if there were small animals to eat, and after walking for so long, he realized that there were no wild hares that were common in the mountains around Guo village, and even the squirrels that hopped around the trees were rare, so how could he hunt any for food?

Zhang Xiaohua grew even more surprised, but if the squirrels that were hibernating in their tree holes knew about Zhang Xiaohua’s thoughts, they might all wake up from the hibernation to bite him together. It was fine if he admired their dances on the treetops on usual days, but now that the snow had enveloped the mountain and they were hibernating, he wanted to eat them and didn’t care if they were living or dead.

If the scholar Li Jinfeng knew of this matter, he would sneakily have slipped the

book “Man and Nature” to Zhang Xiaohua before feeling embarrassed at himself for not being a good enough teacher.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua would pause frequently to study his surroundings while continuing to walk ahead, and just as he was walking, his eyes suddenly twitched and he squinted to look at his distant front. Zhang Xiaohua became overjoyed, was it not a large grey hare spacing out dozens of steps in front of him? Was it not the roasted rabbit leg that he was looking forward to?

Since he found his prey, Zhang Xiaohua began to walk forward carefully, his footsteps were light and careful in fear of alerting the hare which was spacing out.

Unfortunately, even though Zhang Xiaohua had experience chasing chickens and rabbits in his youth, it was restricted only to playing games and having fun with them. When it comes to actual hunting, Zhang Xiaohua was far from being able to catch this hare which was currently spacing out in the snow. The moment he entered a few zhang within the hare’s perimeter, the hare’s ears straightened and it immediately escaped from being in the same realm as the heavenly rabbit. It was no longer a spacing out hare, it inherited the glorious tradition and merged its soul with the wizard rabbit, Bug’s Bunny, Roger Rabbit and Mashimaro. At that moment, it was not a hare that would only stay in Zhang Xiaohua’s face, it was like all the hares that were hunted. In short, it ran far away from Zhang Xiaohua.

Run rabbit run!

How could Zhang Xiaohua rest when he saw his roasted rabbit leg try to escape? He immediately carried his clutch, threw his injuries to the back of his mind and sprinted after it, but sigh, there would always be times when the human’s body could not move according to how he wished it to be.

Hence, this single person and single hare began a wild goose chase in the boundless snowy wilderness. The hare was quick-witted and it ran fast while changing its direction often which made it more difficult for Zhang Xiaohua to chase after it. On the other side, even though Zhang Xiaohua could not run very fast, he had good endurance and this body which would perform the horse stance for more than half a day without feeling any trace of tiredness should not

be underestimated. He did not feel any fatigue after chasing for some while, but the injuries on his body would flare in pain ever so often thus preventing him from pushing himself further, and hence, he could only maintain a certain speed and chase behind the hare until it got tired and succumbed to him.

Even though Zhang Xiaohua's plans were slipshod, they were in the right direction and indeed, after chasing for some while, the hare began to slow down. Happiness rose from the bottom of Zhang Xiaohua's heart as his legs moved even faster.

As he was chasing, Zhang Xiaohua's eyes suddenly brightened. There was a wide and flat field in front of him, and in front of the field was the small mountain he had been looking forward to visit all these while. It seemed that he had closed in to the forest while he was lost in chase with the hare.

However, as he was currently hunting, Zhang Xiaohua did not welcome the small snaky paths in the mountains as he continued to chase the hare which had spaced out earlier.

The hare was not foolish and when it heard the sounds from behind, it also increased its pace and rushed towards the small mountain in front of it. Not long after reaching the front of the mountain, the rabbit began to slow down as it thought that Zhang Xiaohua should have run out of steam. However, the mountain in front of it was not less steep compared to the plateau behind the grass hut so how could it climb up?

When it thought that it had found a place to escape, the escape road turned out to be a dead end so the hare stopped for a moment before running in another direction along the mountain's side.

Zhang Xiaohua naturally continued to chase the hare single-mindedly.

When he saw that the hare was beginning to slow down, Zhang Xiaohua naturally became happier as the distance between them closed down until it was only a few steps before Zhang Xiaohua could extend his hand and catch it.

However, the hare suddenly stopped at that moment, it sniffed a little and its long ears turned around, and once it saw Zhang Xiaohua behind it, it changed its direction and charged towards the mountain.

Zhang Xiaohua who was behind it became overjoyed, had this spaced out hare become stupid from being chased for too long? Was it planning to smash its head onto the mountain? As the saying goes, there is free lunch in the world, Zhang Xiaohua felt as though he was deceived!

However, the thing that happened later left Zhang Xiaohua gaping in astonishment.

When the hare was about to strike onto the stone, it did not break its head and died like how Zhang Xiaohua expected. Instead, there was a faint flash of light and the grey hare, the hare which was chased by Zhang Xiaohua for the entire morning, actually disappeared!

When Zhang Xiaohua caught up to the spot, he rubbed his eyes in disbelief and wondered if his eyesight had turned bad. If not for the tracks the hare left behind, Zhang Xiaohua might have thought that everything that happened earlier was a dream.

Zhang Xiaohua was dumbfounded as he walked to the spot where the hare disappeared earlier, he did not dare to use his hands to feel the area so he used the crutch to prod the rock forcefully to check if there was anything mysterious about it. The crutch did not disappear so he studied the area more carefully, and indeed, he soon discovered that on the spot where the hare disappeared was a region about the size of half a person. Even though it felt solid when prodded by the crutch, there was no snowflakes, bits of stones, or mud dropping from the top, and as any bystander could have guessed, at least some snow should have fallen if Zhang Xiaohua had used his force to poke the area.

Obviously, there was something out of the ordinary in the spot.

Zhang Xiaohua used his crutch again but he poked the spot from downwards, and he realized that there was an area about a foot square where the crutch could extend into as though there was a hole that was invisible to the eye. Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to believe what he saw, but his crutch could extend into the rock wall easily in front of his eyes.

Even when his crutch was about to disappear completely into the hole, he still could not feel the end and just as his hand was about to near the rock wall, Zhang Xiaohua stopped and pondered for a moment before continuing. When

his hand disappeared, Zhang Xiaohua finally believed that there was a hole in the rock wall in front of him.

After Zhang Xiaohua retracted his hand and the crutch, he stood there on the same spot in the snow and began to analyse the situation.

What on earth was in front of him? Should he risk the danger to investigate it?

Youths are curious by nature and Zhang Xiaohua was no exception, but to enter a small cave that he could not see was something out of his comfort zone. After all, he also knew the logic of curiosity killed the cat.

However, Zhang Xiaohua was also unwilling to return to the grass hut empty handed. After pondering for a while, Zhang Xiaohua made large actions and walked towards the forest, but after walking for some distance, Zhang Xiaohua lay on the snowy ground and sneakily raised his head so that he could see the area on the rock wall.

Zhang Xiaohua was going to wait for the hare*.

*TN – Word play: waiting for the hare has the same meaning as waiting for free lunch to appear.

However, after waiting for quite some time, the wild hare did not reappear and Zhang Xiaohua grew frustrated. Perhaps the hare was too smart so it hid deeper into the cave, or perhaps it already succumbed to whatever danger there was inside, or could it be that there was another exit which the hare had escaped from? While Zhang Xiaohua entertained the idea of the third possibility and was about to get up, he saw the head of the wild hare poking out. The hare twitched its head and studied its surroundings before jumping out of the rock wall and running along the mountain's side.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw the wild hare escaped, he did not chase after it immediately and continued to lie down until he was certain that nothing else was going to jump out of the rock wall before walking over slowly.

Actually, when Zhang Xiaohua was lying in the snow, he already made his mind that if the hare could jump back out from the cave, then it should be safe inside and there should not be another exit, so it should be sealed for certain. Furthermore, the entrance seemed to be only a square foot wide so larger

animals would not be able to enter, and thus there should not be any dangers inside.

If the hare did not come out after entering the cave, Zhang Xiaohua would not have dared to follow after it.

When he walked to the front of the rock wall, Zhang Xiaohua stopped his steps, squat down and extended the crutch in again. This time, he tried to investigate if the cave inside was curved or if it was large enough for a person to stand inside. Indeed, when his hand could extend into the cave without feeling any obstructions, Zhang Xiaohua had an idea of how large the cave was in his mind.

Following which, Zhang Xiaohua took out the small sword from his breast and carried it with his left hand while his right hand continued to hold onto the crutch. He first extended the crutch inside before clenching his teeth and climbing into the foot square area in the rock wall.

Zhang Xiaohua who was crawling on the ground only felt his eyes turned blind for a moment before entering the area, and was it not just a normal cave in front of him then? He was lying on the snowy ground of the cave he just entered.

When Zhang Xiaohua stood back up, he observed his surroundings and saw that there was something like a thick fog permeating the entrance he just crawled in from and rays of hazy light fell from it, but he was unable to see the outside. There was still snow blowing in from the entrance and onto his head, while the snowy ground had traces of the wild hare's footprints.

In front of him was a commonly found cave which was slightly taller than Zhang Xiaohua's height, but the inside was pitch black darkness and Zhang Xiaohua could only see the hare's footprints going in and out again messily.

Zhang Xiaohua's heart became more stable somewhat when he saw the tracks.

However, he still threw the clutch in his right hand inwards and when he heard the "dang" sound of it falling onto the ground with no other movement, he took out a fire starter from his breast, lit it up and carried it with his right hand while his left hand still gripped onto the small sword and protected his front. With the little light from the fire starter, Zhang Xiaohua took carefully steps into the darkness.

When he walked into the cave with the fire starter illuminating his surroundings, Zhang Xiaohua finally relaxed completely.

It was a very common cave about the size of a small room, and there were rectangular rocks inside. On the side of the rocks was similar to a table, and there were even small stone stools around the table. There was a money pouch and a rectangular rock on the table, and everywhere else was bare apart from the crutch he had thrown inside.

When he saw the scene in front of him, Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows, what kind of place was this for it to be so mysterious, yet there was nothing but a money pouch inside of it?

He did not rush to pick up the money pouch since whatever on the table would belong to him sooner or later. Hence, he did not give up and carried the fire starter to study the entire cave carefully, even using his crutch to knock onto its walls, but apart from finding some round dents in the wall, there was nothing else. Some of the round dents were too high for Zhang Xiaohua to reach so he used his crutch instead, but there were still no new findings so Zhang Xiaohua finally gave up and went over to the stone table.

Zhang Xiaohua raised his small sword and prodded the money pouch, he shook the pouch but it did not feel any different, so he poked the rectangular stone instead, but it also looked very normal. Zhang Xiaohua kept his small sword into his breast and used his left hand to pick up the stone, he brought his fire starter closer to it and inspected it carefully, but no matter how much he looked at it, it seemed not different from the cobblestones in the river. Was it here because its shape was unusual?

Zhang Xiaohua threw the stone back onto the table top unhappily, his heart was filled with anticipation as he picked up the small money pouch. However, when he picked up the money pouch lightly, his heart also flew away lightly and all the warm excitement cooled off immediately. While he thought that the money pouch would contain several coins, if not some pieces of gold, the feeling when he picked up the money pouch told him that it was empty and made him disappointed.

Zhang Xiaohua did not gave up hope and put his hand into the money pouch to

search before facing its mouth downwards to empty it, but there was not even a single rabbit hair inside.

Zhang Xiaohua could not help but feel extremely disappointed, had he known that this would happen earlier, he would have continued to pursue the hare so at least his dinner for that night would be satisfying. Instead, all he had to show for the time he spent lying in the snow was an empty money pouch and a lousy cobblestone.

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips and was about to throw the money pouch back onto the stone table when his fingers rubbed against it, and he felt that the material used to make the money pouch seemed quite good. He pondered for a while, and thought that since he did not own a money pouch, and the coins the master gave him was still bundled in a cloth, he might as well take it back with him. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua placed the fire starter onto the table and took out the coins from his breast before pouring all his money into the money pouch, sealing its mouth, threw it into the air and catching it again. He felt pretty good, haha, at least it was not a completely wasted trip.

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was about to take back the fire starter from the table, his attention fell onto the stone on the table top. Even though it seemed normal, why would someone place it in here specially? Perhaps there was some mystery surrounding it? Whatever, he might as well take it with him than to lose out on an opportunity, why would there not be any treasure in a treasure trove? He had to bring it away even if it was just a normal piece of stone. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua picked up the rectangular stone and threw it into the money pouch before keeping it into his breast, and he picked up the fire starter again.

After checking his surroundings for a final time, he exited the cave reluctantly.

Zhang Xiaohua stared at the hazy light of the entrance and felt strange, how could such a mysterious place not contain anything mysterious for him to take away? He would not be surprised even if the money pouch was filled with gold, yet it was empty instead.

Suddenly, he thought of a question, why would there be a foot square entrance that leads to the cave? Someone must have entered here before, and since that person came here, why couldn't he leave anything behind for him?

The empty money pouch was definitely the result of someone else taking all the money inside and casually leaving it behind, whereas the white rectangular stone was definitely left behind as well on purpose because it was of no use. Zhang Xiaohua sighed in his heart, forget it, at least he managed to pick up a money pouch to hold those few coins he now possessed.

After raising his spirits again, Zhang Xiaohua was prepared to leave when the snow from the save entrance fell even greater, and the tracks he left earlier were about to be covered. Zhang Xiaohua picked up his crutch again and bent his body as he slowly crawled through the cave mouth. Hence, from the outside of the cave, an unimaginable scene appeared. A solid looking crutch first poked out from the rock wall before a youth's head appeared, and he finally climbed out completely.

Fortunately, there was no one around or they might have been frightened out of their wits.

When Zhang Xiaohua climbed out of the cave, he looked at the surroundings and felt that it was getting late, there was still a forest he had to cross and there was no wild hare around. Zhang Xiaohua dusted off the snow and mud from his clothes and looked at the ordinary rock wall which was no different from the other sides, he then followed his footprints in the snow and walked back from where he came from.

After Zhang Xiaohua left, the snow fell heavier and not long after, the snow covered Zhang Xiaohua's footprints completely. Even before nightfall, there was only a flat white ground of snow left from where Zhang Xiaohua came from.

At that moment, the pitiful directionally-challenged Zhang Xiaohua was still following his footprints on the snow as he rushed back to the grass hut. He prayed as he ran to never, ever get lost in a time like this.

Perhaps because Zhang Xiaohua's prayers were effective, or that he had already been through the forest many times, but just as the sky was about to turn dark, Zhang Xiaohua found himself in front of the tall plateau again.

Zhang Xiaohua could not help but feel happy inside, his worried state of mind calmed down and right at that moment, his left leg suddenly kicked something hard that was not like a stone or tree branch. When Zhang Xiaohua picked it up

and raised it to the front of his eyes, he realized that it was a wild hare that was frozen to death.

Chapter 132: Investigation

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Investigation

During the night, Zhang Xiaohua finally got to eat his long awaited rabbit leg. However, it was not roasted, because even though Zhang Xiaohua came from a poor family and was used to doing household chores, he was still a boy and most of the work he did was centered on the fields. As for matters such as cooking, it was still foreign to him and the closest thing he had done was draw spring water to boil tea.

Due to this, even though Zhang Xiaohua wanted to eat some barbeque, he finally shaved off the rabbit's skin, and from what he learnt by watching his parents prepare chickens, he prepared the wild hare meat and dumped them into a pot to boil. After the meat was fully cooked, even though there was no seasoning or other ingredients put inside, it still smelled heavenly to him and Zhang Xiaohua became ravenous.

Zhang Xiaohua then closed his eyes and thought in his heart, "I am eating roast rabbit meat, I am eating roast rabbit meat." Without fear of the scalding temperature, he picked up the entire rabbit from the water and began to eat until his face was full of oil, and his heart full of happiness!

After Zhang Xiaohua finished the entire rabbit, he still felt a trace of reluctance and licked its bones cleanly before throwing them into the river. However, it was mid-winter and the river was already frozen solid so a "ka dang" sound appeared when the bones collided onto the river surface. Even though he could remove the evidence of eating meat, as the saying goes, it is a fish and I am a knife, why should he hide the carcass? After all, the law of strong eating the weak was part of Jianghu anyway.

Moving away from Zhang Xiaohua who finally satisfied his desire and was currently picking his gums with a toothpick while looking leisurely at the snowstorm in front of him, in the north side of Piaomiao sect's discussion hall, Ou Peng was currently convening with several brothers and thinking of ways to find the "carcass that was thrown" into the river.

It did not snow in Piaomiao mountain village, but the sky was covered in grey clouds and the wind was chilly. Even though there were thick curtains blocking the winds in the discussion hall, some of the chill still permeated through, except that the current atmosphere in the discussion room was piercingly severe and cold and anyone would prefer to be standing outside right then.

At the front of the discussion hall, sect master Ou Peng's expression was sullen as he sat as his usual sear, and under the wavering light of the lamp, the occasional shadow would appear on his face causing it to look more severe and making the rest of the people in the discussion hall more uptight.

At that moment, everyone was quiet within the discussion hall and no one dared to make a single squeak. After half a bell of time, Ou Peng coughed and asked in a cordial tone, "Eldest senior brother, how is Yan-er's condition right now?"

The usually uninspiring-looking first elder Hu also had a wooden face as he replied, "Yan-er's body is already weak to begin with, and during the night when she left, it was raining badly and she thus caught a cold. Adding on the shockwaves of the blacked cloth elder which caused some internal injuries, her illness became worse and more severe. I heard from hallmaster Qin that she had lost consciousness on the way back, and was treated by a physician on her way back when she regained her consciousness again. Second brother had also hurried over and used his inner energy to treat Yan-er's injuries, and after eating some of our sect's medicine, she had recovered by quite much. After being diagnosed by the sect's physician from Pingyang city, she is mostly well and would be able to get up again after resting for some time."

Upon hearing of Ou Yan's improving condition, Ou Peng's expression softened slightly and he said to first elder Hu, "Eldest senior brother, I am slightly busier during this period so I would need you to pay more attention to the matters on Yan'er's side."

First elder Hu nodded as he replied, “Yan-er is the apple of our eyes so you can rest well. Now that she has returned to our base, I will not let her suffer any inconvenience again.”

Ou Peng nodded and looked at the disciplinary hall’s hallmaster Liu Yuzhou and asked, “How has the investigation on the origins of the black clothed men been going?”

Liu Yuzhou hesitated for a moment before saying, “After your subordinate received sect master’s instructions, I immediately went over personally to investigate the matter. I am aware that young mistress’s return trip prioritized her safety so even though the weather had turned cold, I was afraid that too much time had passed such that the corpses of the fallen black clothed men would decompose. As for those corpses, I have personally inspected them, seen their faces and bodies, and made records to pursue their backgrounds. However, among these men, the black clothed elder’s face had been disfigured and I could not recognize him, and as for the other men, it is not easy for our disciples to search for them among the masses as well.”

Ou Peng replied angrily, “Find them, you must find them. Difficult does not mean impossible, and as long as there is a shred of clue, we will have to chase them to the ends.”

Liu Yuzhou immediately bowed and said, “I will follow sect master’s directions.”

Ou Peng calmed himself down and then continued his questioning, “Are there any other leads?”

Liu Yuzhou shook his head and said, “The clothes these black clothed men wore and the weapons they used are ordinary items that are common in Jianghu, and we could not find any noteworthy clue from them. Furthermore, there was nothing on their bodies that was identifiable, and I am unable to produce results from air, so we could not obtain any results from our inspection.”

Ou Peng snorted and said, “So there is not even a single lead?”

Liu Yuzhou lowered his voice and said, “Your subordinate is incompetent, I am unable to find any leads at the moment.”

He opened his mouth again, but seemed afraid to speak. Ou Peng wrinkled his brows and said, “Just say what you need to say, your responsibility is large and you must find the party who was behind this attack, our Piaomiao sect is not someone that can be trifled with so easily.”

Liu Yuzhou hurried bowed and said, “Your subordinate has received an account from the Mingcui hall’s female disciples to learn more of the events on that day, but I would prefer to receive a more detailed explanation. Since hallmaster Qin and Shi Niu had been kept under sect master for the past few days, I could not find the opportunity to talk to them, so do you think they can describe the events again to me since they are both here? What do you think?”

Ou Peng nodded and said, “That would be good, I have heard a bit and felt that the situation was strange, so let’s use the opportunity that everyone is present to let them explain properly today. Shi Niu, explain everything in detail to us again.”

Shi Niu touched his forehead and asked, “Sect master, I must say everything?”

Ou Peng glared back at him and said, “Cut the crap, describe every single thing that happened.”

Shi Niu pondered and began to speak, “So on the day, I was steering the carriage and drove villa master Ou and hallmaster Qin out from Huanxi mountain villa through the villa’s main door ... and then, I felt my spirits rise so I sang a little song. At the beginning, everyone was in praise of me, but as I continued to sing the same song, they began to grow tired from it. However, sect master, my abilities are limited and even if you asked me to sing a different song, I would not be able to do so.”

Everyone who was listening looked at each other with confused expression while Liu Qingyang almost spat out the wine he was drinking. Everyone could not help but laugh aloud.

Ou Peng also did not know if he should laugh or cry, he waved his hands and said, “Shi Niu, just say the important things.”

Shi Niu wrinkled his brows and replied, “Sect master, didn’t you ask me to describe everything?”

Ou Peng “pooh” and said, “I do want to you describe everything, but only for the events that happened before and after the attack. When you first drove the carriage out of the mountain villa, we still did not know where those black clothed men were so what’s there to say? Also, what does your singing have to do with the attack?”

Shi Niu replied in a wronged tone, “How would I know which matters are related to the black clothed men, perhaps my singing was too good that it got them jealous? And perhaps the black clothed men already tailed us since we left the mountain villa.”

Even though the speaker said it casually, the listener gained more that he said. Ou Peng rolled his eyes and nodded, he said, “You are right, Liu Yuzhou, do you understand?”

Liu Yuzhou nodded and said, “Your subordinate understands.”

Shi Niu asked in a puzzled tone, “Hallmaster Liu, what did you understand? Why don’t I understand as well?”

Ou Peng raised his hands and said, “It is none of your concern, just continue with your story.”

Shi Niu asked in a patient tone, “So do I still say everything out?”

Ou Peng pondered for a while and replied, “Yes, say describe everything in detail.”

Shi Niu asked again, “Do I really have to say every single thing?”

Ou Peng flared up, “Just do as I tell you to, say everything even if you don’t think it is important.”

Shi Niu’s face turned red and he hesitated before saying, “About this, I don’t think there’s a need to mention it.”

Ou Peng clenched his teeth and looked as though he was about to burst.

Upon seeing his response, Shi Niu hurriedly said everything honestly.

Even though Shi Niu looked like a rough and reckless person, he was extremely meticulous and would describe things of all manners that happened on the road, even if they were insignificant and in an enthusiastic tone.

When he came to the part that at every rest stop for the night, a boy named Zhang Xiaohua from Huanxi mountain villa would always want to leave the set up base to practice martial arts, Ou Peng could not help but wrinkle his brows and looked at Madam Qin with an uncertain expression, he asked, "This youth named Zhang Xiaohua, why is his name so familiar?"

Before Ou Peng could finish his sentence, Liu Yuzhou stood up immediately and said in an urgent voice, "Hallmaster Qin, did you all not follow when this youth went out every day? There is a high possibility for him to be a spy of the black clothed people, where is he right now? I will have to detain him and thoroughly interrogate him."

Shi Niu who was speaking heartily naturally did not dare to speak up when Ou Peng interrupted him, but when he heard Liu Yuzhou's words, he immediately got pissed and said angrily, "Why do you talk about Zhang Xiaohua like this, I guarantee that Zhang Xiaohua has nothing to do with the black clothed people."

Liu Yuzhou replied, "If he was a spy, his cover would naturally be good so how would you know? Shi Niu, you might have been misled since you are more careless by nature, but one cannot just guarantee for another based on his feelings towards that someone."

At that moment, an oriole like voice sounded, "Hallmaster Liu, I am of the same thought as Shi Niu, and I dare to guarantee with my last name on line that Zhang Xiaohua is not a spy against us."

Shi Niu did not turn his head since he knew that it was Madam Qin who spoke, he wrinkled his brows and said, "Hallmaster Qin, now is not the time to use integrity to discuss this matter. We are looking for leads, and must follow any spider silk thin suspicion we have, as it is better to kill a wrongly accused innocent than to let free someone who is guilty."

Madam Qin became anxious and replied in one breath, "In that case, have you heard a spy kill his own ally at the most critical moment; would a spy risk his life to save his target despite not knowing any martial arts?"

Liu Yuzhou was surprised, he replied in a puzzled tone, "Hallmaster Qin, there is no need to be so agitated. Regarding Zhang Xiaohua, what do you mean by your last sentence?"

Shi Niu growled from his side to interrupt the two, he said, "Zhang Xiaohua was the person who was protecting villa master Ou and also the person who killed that black clothed elder."

Liu Yuzhou came to realize the facts and he stood up to apologize, "Hallmaster Qin, I apologize, this person still am not aware of some matters."

Madam Qin heaved a sigh of relief and said cheerfully, "It's fine, it's fine. Hallmaster Liu, I was anxious at the moment too. Actually, I had sent people to follow Zhang Xiaohua when he went out to practice martial arts, he was indeed practicing some rubbish martial arts and probably being embarrassed of being the joke of others. I have confirmed these with pharmacy hall's He Tianshu as well."

Ou Peng smiled when he heard these, he said, "Mm, now that you mentioned it, I seemed to recall this name that Yan-er brought up when she was awake. She said that he had saved her life, and if I am not wrong, he fell into the river after being injured by the black clothed person and is missing right now?"

First elder Hu spoke up, "We still have not found him yet, and have already sent our men and some resources to search for him."

Afterwards, he hesitated for a moment and continued, "However, we already searched for about ten li downstream of the incident and have yet to find the person or his corpse. It has been almost a month so there is probably no more hope in finding him. It is quite likely that after he was flung into the river with injuries inflicted by the black clothed elder, his corpse became food for the fishes in the river."

Ou Peng nodded and said, "Mm, this person had saved Yan-er's life after all, so we must spare no efforts to compensate him."

First elder Hu promised, "Now that it is the New Year, our sect is currently busy and this type of matter might not be appropriate to be disseminated. Moreover, he has an elder brother who is currently working as a delivery hand in the Lotus escort, and has recently left on a mission, so we can continue this when he returns."

Ou Peng nodded silently before motioning to Shi Niu to continue.

Shi Niu acknowledged the former, but he glared at Liu Yuzhou fiercely before continuing with his story, and describing every single event that occurred during their journey.

After Shi Niu finished his recount, first elder Hu spoke up first, he said, "For such an attack to occur, the other party must have been following them right from the start and had probed our power in the middle. Madam Qin is a famous figure in Jianghu and her martial arts skill is pretty well-known, but Shi Niu martial art skill is still relatively unknown even among our sect. The second match during the robbery and the Shi Niu's opponent during the rainy night were obviously related. They probably did not expect the pharmacy hall's He Tianshu to be in the party, and even though this little guy does not have superb martial arts, he became an obstacle which caused them to stall their plans during the first robbery."

Ou Peng followed immediately first elder Hu to speak, "Hence, they quickly found this martial art expert black figure elder to make preparations for the worst case scenario. First to send opponents of similar levels to block Madam Qin and the rest, then get the black clothed elder to kidnap and assassinate Yan-er, haha, good plan, well-devised indeed."

First elder Hu also laughed as he replied, "However, they did not expect our disciples to see through their ruse and send reinforcements after the party."

Ou Peng still had hints of a smile as he continued, "That's right, this disciple named Lan Dong is not bad at all. He is sharp and meticulous; he should have returned with the party right. Switch him out with another disciple and allow him to stay in the sect, then nurture him well afterwards, I believe that he will be useful in the future."

First elder Hu replied, "That's right, it is all thanks to Lan Dong this time. Without the news he sent, we would still be kept in the dark, and old second and old sixth would not have reached in time, so his reward is well deserved."

At that moment, Shi Niu spoke up and said, "Sect master, I feel that the person who contributed most this time is Zhang Xiaohua, if he had not killed the black clothed elder, and if villa master had suffered more severe injuries, then even if Lan Dong and the rest arrived, I'm afraid..."

Upon hearing these words, Ou Peng nodded and said, "You are indeed right, but this person had already passed away so there is no use in discussing it further. Zhang Xiaohua is also not a person from our Piaomiao sect so how could I commend him. At most, we can only give his family more compensation."

Shi Niu scratched his head and said, "Shi Niu has no other comments as long as sect master knows who made the largest contribution."

Liu Yuzhou spoke up again, "Sect master, after listening to Shi Niu's account from earlier, I feel that the other party is either a sect whom we are familiar with or a famous sect in Jianghu. Their martial arts and members are familiar to us so they were afraid to show their true might, which was why they ended up in a different direction and used some random men causing their side to be outnumbered during the attack. If not, just based on the people who were with the young mistress, the black clothed people would not have to scheme and plan so much, and just directly attacked instead."

Ou Peng smiled and said, "Since hallmaster Liu said all these, it means that you have a suspicion so I will continue to reply on you to investigate this matter. I hope to see the light through the stones soon."

Liu Yuzhou made a bitter expression and said, "Understood, your subordinate will try his best."

Afterwards, Ou Peng turned to Shi Niu and Madam Qin, he said, "Hallmaster Qin, Shi Niu, both of you have suffered earlier, but the mishaps on the journey was partially caused by your incompetence in planning. So tell me, how should I punish you for it?"

Madam Qin smiled bitterly and replied, "As sect master has said, I have been too careless and if I were slightly more attentive, I would have realized the trap we were heading to, so the situation would not have come to this. Your subordinate willingly accepts her punishment."

Shi Niu scratched his head and said, "Sect master, I also know that I did wrong and am willing to accept my punishment. However, I am fine with any punishment as long as you do not prohibit me to drink. When I went out with the young mistress, I did not dare to drink at all and if you disallow me to drink now that I have returned, I might suffer too much from the withdrawal symptoms."

Everyone smiled slightly, and the atmosphere in the discussion hall lightened up considerably.

Ou Peng smiled as he said, “Since the two of you took part in the trip, you have suffered even if you did not contribute much. Nevertheless, our sect is clear on our stance towards punishment and reward, so we will not sentence you two unfairly. Go to the disciplinary hall to accept your punishment later.”

Madam Qin and Shi Niu immediately bowed and said, “We understand, sect master.”

Ou Peng waved his hands and allowed Liu Yuzhou, Madam Qin, Shi Niu and the rest take their leave.

After they were gone, Ou Peng said to first elder Hu, “Eldest senior brother, this year has passed so quickly and in the blink of an eye, it is the fifteenth of the month, so all the things must be planned properly again.”

Chapter 133: Getting lost

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Getting lost

First elder Hu smiled and said, "That's right, it is another year again but it still felt like the last New Year was yesterday. We have all grown old as the years pass in front of our eyes."

Second elder Li Jian who was silent all these while interrupted to say, "It is because we are old that the outstanding people among the young ones can rise."

Ou Peng smiled and said, "Second senior brother is absolutely right, weren't we the same in our youth; However, I disagree with eldest senior brother that we have grown old, now that eldest senior brother's inner energy is so profound, he can be considered an expert in Jianghu. As the saying goes, old steeds can have high aspirations, you can still achieve many things as long as you try."

Fifth elder Liu Qingyang cried out, "Why does eldest senior brother have to worry about growing old, you can eat that whatever longevity extending pill when the time comes right?"

When first elder Hu heard his words, he wrinkled his brow and said in a stern voice, "Old fifth, what did I say at this same place last year? Have you already forgotten?"

Fifth elder Liu shirked his neck and said sheepishly, "This... about this, I naturally did not forget eldest senior brother's teachings, but I was merely shooting my mouth."

First elder Hu studied the entire hall and said, "I will say this again, our Piaomiao sect does not have what longevity extending pill, so whatever you know about it is only hearsay, remember this."

Everyone chorused, “We understand, eldest senior brother.”

Sixth elder Xu Peihua asked, “Third senior brother, when is forth senior brother returning?”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “I have just received the news that old fourth and Shui Yupeng have already taken action, so I guess that he will return in two days’ time.”

Sixth elder Xu continued, “We six brothers have been passing the New Years together, but now that an additional Luoshui sect has popped up and fourth brother has to be assigned over, I am beginning to miss him slightly.”

Ou Peng said, “The situation in Luoshui sect is urgent so we naturally need someone over there. Shui Yupeng’s martial arts skill might be good but he lacks in the area of planning so old fourth is the most appropriate person to go over. Now that it is the new year, all the more must the sect master remain in the sect, and since I cannot go over to Luoshui personally, Shui Yupeng must be there. The two of them will be returning anyway, and it will be lively soon again.”

First elder Hu smiled and said, “Old third is right, the position of the sect master naturally carries some responsibility with it, and the time belonged to oneself would also decrease. However, old third-ah, even though it is the New Year again, this year is going to be quite different from last year.”

Ou Peng and the rest looked smilingly at first elder Hu while their hearts were busting with pride.

First elder Hu continued, “In a short year span of time, our Piaomiao sect has expanded quite significantly, and our disciples’ martial arts are out of the ordinary, not to mention that we have already acquired Luoshui sect causing our power to be adept in both land and water, this is indeed one good news after another.”

Fifth elder Liu suddenly interrupted and said, “Sesame blooms higher and higher!”

Everyone was surprised, and they laughed, “Old fifth words are right.”

Sixth elder Xu asked in a puzzled tone, “Fifth brother, when did you drop the mentality of not wanting to read?”

Fifth elder Liu glanced at him and said, “Can’t I listen to books if I don’t read them?”

So it was like this, and everyone laughed again.

After the laughter subsided, Ou Peng said to first elder Hu, “These fortunes are all due to the secret area. Hence, to our fellow remaining brothers seated today, we will need to discuss the matter of entering the secret area again.”

Upon hearing these words, fifth elder Liu and sixth elder Xu both stopped talking, they usually only listened when it came to such a serious topic, and their mouths were used for drinking wine instead. As for second elder Li, his expression was still like water and his eyes would twitch ever so occasionally, while the thoughts in his head remained hidden.

Ou Peng already knew that this was going to happen, he might have directed his words to everyone but his eyes were on first elder Hu.

First elder Hu smiled and said, “Old third, what are you thinking of? Let’s listen to your thoughts first since old fourth is not around. You can then have a good discussion with him when he returns.”

Ou Peng said, “It is actually very simple, eldest senior brother, my opinion is the same as before. We will not do things differently from before and continue to sneak in the dark to send an inconspicuous disciple over.”

First elder Hu wrinkled his brows and said. “Our sect has been expanding much during this period of time and our disciples’ martial arts have also improved greatly, there will definitely be people watching them if they make any actions. If we are only sending disciples over, then their safety would be an issue to consider.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “We have to do so precisely because people will be watching us. If either you or I went instead, won’t we garner more attention onto ourselves? If we send more disciples out, won’t it provide a better smokescreen and prevent the other parties from knowing our real motives? Actually, I feel that the matter of this secret area will be let out sooner or later, so we can only grab the opportunity in front of us now and gain as much benefits as possible.”

First elder Hu asked again, “And will sir Yanming be heading the operations this time round?”

Ou Peng smiled bitterly and said, “There is not much choice in this matter, he had gone the two previous times and is most familiar with the place. Furthermore, he is the only one among us four who do not attract the attention from the rest of Jianghu, so who would be a more suitable candidate than him?”

First elder Hu smiled and said, “This sir Yanming is an honest and outstanding person, but who would not be tempted in the face of such temptation? I hope that he does not do anything foolish this time as well.”

Ou Peng said, “Let him decide, he is the weakest among us four factions so he would have to consider carefully before pulling any moves.”

First elder Hu said, “In that case, I do not have any other opinions. What about the rest of you?”

First elder Hu turned his head towards the rest who were seated.

Fifth elder Liu and sixth elder Xu were currently partaking in wine and when they heard their eldest senior brother spoke, they quickly swallowed the wine in their mouths and nodded hurriedly. Second elder Li grunted softly to show his approval.

Upon seeing their responses, first elder Hu smiled and said, “Since we brothers have no opinions, you can first proceed with whatever preparations needed and discuss with old fourth later when he comes back. Oh right, about this matter, I think we should not let Shui Yupeng into the loop for now since we can only know a person and his face but not his heart, so this would be the safest thing to do.”

Ou Peng smiled and said, “Eldest senior brother can relax, the fewer people who know about the secret area, the better the secret will be kept after all.”

First elder Hu said, “Alright, then we shall do it this way. I will be assured if it is you who is handling the matter, so just do what you think is right.”

Everyone else was also of the same opinion as they expressed their agreement.

Ou Peng remained silent and his fingers pinched his nose as he smiled bitterly.

As for how Ou Peng arranged his men and dispatched his disciples to put up a smokescreen, it will be put aside for Zhang Xiaohua who somehow managed to enter a death honour list, and he still had no idea of what was being discussed of him as he continued to wait patiently for the search party who would never come!

It snowed outside the grass hut for the entire night and when the sun rose again, the snow gradually lightened and the sky turned blue while the sun shone its brilliant rays into the wide snow expanse. If one stood at the river side and looked at the frozen jade-like river, snow-capped mountains, he would become breathless from the beautiful scenery.

With such picturesque scenery before him, perhaps one could compose some good art if his heart was calm and settled. It was such a pity that what the anxious Zhang Xiaohua wanted to see was not the painting-like scenery but some movements in the form of people looking for him.

Unfortunately for him, there was no human figures in the snow covered desolate wilderness, and since the river was frozen solid, there were no boats to be seen. Zhang Xiaohua felt frustrated as he threw a rock onto the hard river surface, heard a “ka chang” sound, and watched the stone break through the ice and sink into the river depths without reappearing again. Zhang Xiaohua then realized that the layer of ice was not thick, and his forehead perspired when he thought of his previous intention of jumping onto the ice to play.

After becoming frightened, Zhang Xiaohua could not maintain his composure and returned back into the grass hut again.

From his rough estimation, it had been over a month since he separated from the carriage party, and since he had not seen anyone coming by to search for him, perhaps his previous view was too optimistic. Zhang Xiaohua laughed at himself, the entire party’s aim was to ensure Ou Yan’s safety and since they suffered under the attack of the black clothed men, everyone’s first priority was to protect Ou Yan so where would they find the extra manpower to search for him?

When he thought up to here, Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly miffed at being slighted by so many people. They were all people, and they all had mothers who

gave birth to them, so why couldn't everyone be treated fairly? Zhang Xiaohua would not blame them if he was born from some demon, but he had saved the villa master after all so why couldn't they show some concern for him? Come over and look for him, and let Zhang Xiaohua feel a bit of warmth from the mountains!

This servant had wronged the mountain villa people, why did he not think of how far he had floated downstream, how could he expect the others to find him at all?

However, the kind hearted Zhang Xiaohua immediately turned his grievances into concern for Ou Yan and Qiu Tong, he wondered if the two had managed to escape from the life-threatening situation? Perhaps because they were still in danger that no one else had been dispatched to look for him?

This is the kind heartedness of a village youth who had already learnt to provide excuses for other people!

When he thought of all these, Zhang Xiaohua decided not to stay in the grass hut any longer. When he thought of the day, he guessed that it must have been the New Year and the desire to huddle with his family around a stove crept into his bones. Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly returned to the grass hut, packed his belongings and prepared to leave the place.

When it came to packing, the first thing he found was the crutch. Zhang Xiaohua was washed ashore with nothing on his body apart from the small sword, and now he was going to leave the place with an additional money pouch he picked that more importantly, contained some money. If not for the slippery snow, Zhang Xiaohua would be too lazy to bring the crutch along.

Zhang Xiaohua carefully covered the firewood storeroom in the grass hut and looked around at the place he had stayed for over a month, he felt some reluctance as the memories of time spent with master Jing Xuan and the arrogant but pitiful little Meng drifted into his mind.

Were they doing well now? In the sea of crowd, he did not know where they were at, and perhaps would never meet them again in this lifetime. Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and his left hand felt the small sword which already had a new owner, he smiled bitterly and turned around to talk out of the courtyard.

On the left of the grass hut were several small roads that trailed along the river, their paths were still clear when it had not snowed but all traces had been covered then, and Zhang Xiaohua could not possibly shovel away all the snow so he had no choice but to walk along the slippery bank of the river.

When master Jing Xuan left, she had clearly explained the exit path to Zhang Xiaohua who memorized it clearly, but unfortunately, the details she described were not taking into account the snow, and now that the entire place became snow white wonderland, whatever landmark or whichever direction Zhang Xiaohua should follow became indiscernible. Zhang Xiaohua felt some regret, what could he do now? He could not possibly return to the grass hut and wait for the snow to melt right?

Now that it was winter, if he wanted to wait for the snow to melt, then wouldn't he have to wait until spring?

When Zhang Xiaohua imagined himself sitting alone in the grass hut, he immediately pushed the idea away and continued to walk along the river bank.

The small path did not follow along the river all the way, when Zhang Xiaohua reached a certain point, he pondered for a while and immediately walked to the opposite direction of the river for half a bell of time before seeing a forest in front of him. Zhang Xiaohua secretly felt thrilled, the scene was exactly how master Jing Xuan had described to him so he was probably on the right track. Hence, he continued to walk in the same direction and brush through the forest.

However, the moment Zhang Xiaohua stepped into the forest, he could not help but lament, the snow in the forest was not a bit less than outside, and there were much dried grass and bare branches so walking on the forest ground was inconvenient. Even if there was no snow, the path was still difficult to cross, so could this still be the road master Jing Xuan took when she left?

A large suspicion grew in Zhang Xiaohua's heart.

Actually, master Jing Xuan's descriptions were accurate, and Zhang Xiaohua's memory was even more so. However, master Jing Xuan might have forgotten that when she took this route, she had used her qinggong to travel on the canopy so how would she know what Zhang Xiaohua would face if he walked step by step on the ground?

Since master Jing Xuan forgot about it, Zhang Xiaohua was even more ignorant as he secretly admired the former as he walked. Old ginger was still spicier, and she was able to endure more hardships than the generation younger than her. If the master had walked such a torturous path every day and night, then he must have been living a too pampered life so far.

However, after walking for another bell worth of time, Zhang Xiaohua no longer felt any admiration or hope, and indeed, no one would be in a good mood after walking in the snowy forest ground for such a long time. When Zhang Xiaohua was experiencing the same thing the previous day, it was with anticipation for a delicious meal so he did not spare much thought to his discomfort, but to experience the same thing again that day without any distraction was a painful experience for him. How did master Jing Xuan found such a desolated area, could she have floated from the river as well?

Actually, the scariest part was Zhang Xiaohua did not realize that each and every step he took was deviating more and more from the correct path in the dense forest, and when he reached the end, he was surprised to see that there was a flat plain in front of him instead of a small mountain range as master Jing Xuan had described.

Zhang Xiaohua immediately blanked out, this, obviously meant that he had lost his way. However, this result was not entirely out of Zhang Xiaohua's expectations, the boy was pretty confident in his lack of sense of directions, and after walking for such a long period even without any awareness of his current position, it was unlikely for him to not get lost.

After reflecting quietly for some while, Zhang Xiaohua chose a direction and decided to walk straight in the same direction for the rest of his journey. After all, as long as he was patient enough, there would come a day when he reached a village or town.

Perhaps it was due to Zhang Xiaohua's luck, or it was simply fate, but in the other direction of the dense forest which master Jing Xuan pointed out, there was indeed a small mountain that was shorter than the one behind the grass hut. However, it was currently covered in snow and crossing it would be difficult, whereas the path Zhang Xiaohua headed to was precisely to the other side of the mountain range, and to cross the mountain range by ascending it was not just as

simple as how master Jing Xuan said casually, “After you cross the mountain range, you will see a forest of fruit trees and if you follow the path through the forest, you will be able to see end of the route.”

Evidently, the word “cross” which master Jing Xuan used probably meant if the said person was using qinggong, and one might wonder if she ever thought of how Zhang Xiaohua would cross the mountain range when she carried little Meng while crossing the mountain range herself?

As if he was a road-dumb idiot who had not stumbled on an easier path, Zhang Xiaohua continued to trudge step by step in the direction he decided upon earlier. Fortunately for him, his injuries had mostly healed and his body was also unordinary so he did not feel tired despite walking for so long.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua walked like this for the other half of the day and when he saw the sun beginning to set, he felt anxious. Even though walking was not a problem, what should he do when the sky darkened? He could not possibly continue to walk since one still needed sufficient rest, and when he thought of his own habit which required himself to sleep by midnight, Zhang Xiaohua shuddered as he looked at the uninhibited surroundings.

Zhang Xiaohua stopped his tracks and faced the setting sun, his hands covered the top of his eyes and he looked to afar. There seemed to be a mountain in the distance, and perhaps he would find a cave to rest his body for the night. Thus, after coming to this conclusion, Zhang Xiaohua kept his crutch and took a deep breath before running in the direction of the mountain.

As the sky turned darker, Zhang Xiaohua’s steps became quicker and his heart jumped faster when he saw the mountain nearing himself. When he reached the front of the mountain, there was only a line of hazy light left in the horizon, and Zhang Xiaohua’s body was in a pretty good condition as well as he breathed heavily to catch his breath.

The mountain path was quite even so it was easy to climb up, so Zhang Xiaohua seized that there was still some light in the sky to hurry up and find a cave. However, the higher he climbed, the more Zhang Xiaohua’s enthusiasm cooled off, as he still had yet to find a suitable accommodation for the night despite the sky about to turn dark soon.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua had already climbed up quite high and when he raised his head, he could not help but feel joy, there was a black shadow ahead which was obviously taller than its side, Zhang Xiaohua increased his pace and when he closed in to the area, he felt a stone fell off from his heart. If it was not an abandoned hut, that what else could it be?

Zhang Xiaohua continued to walk towards the structure, he took out the fire starter from his breast and lit it to see a dilapidated temple. The plaque at the front above its door was already broken in half and slanted but one could make out the words "Mountain god shrine". Zhang Xiaohua was stunned, how could there be such a shrine in the middle of wilderness?

It was still good as well, now that Zhang Xiaohua's wish was fulfilled and he did not have to sleep in the wilderness that night.

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua carried his fire starter and walked into the shrine first to do a simple search before picking up some branches from the surroundings and starting a bonfire within the main hall of the shrine.

After a tiring journey for the entire day, Zhang Xiaohua leaned towards the warm bonfire and ate some dry rations that he brought in his body, his mood improved tremendously after his stomach was filled. After his meal, Zhang Xiaohua collected his feelings and entered a stance, and he began to practice nine cycles of the dipper heavenly fist in the empty space of the shrine until the cooling sensation appeared and flowed throughout his body. Zhang Xiaohua stretched his limbs comfortably, the day had passed pretty well for him.

Of course, now that his injury was better, Zhang Xiaohua did not neglect the sword martial art which elder Yu imparted to him as he practiced it once over. Only after then did he gather some straws behind the temple and placed them beside the fire before falling asleep contentedly.

Chapter 134: Danger

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Danger

The night sky was boundless, and the half crescent of the moon hung on its side. The white snowy ground reflected off some dim light, and within the quiet wilderness, a black dot suddenly appeared from afar and shot towards the snow covered mountains.

The black dot headed unhesitatingly through the tree branches, its feet seemed to skim over the thick snow on the ground, and wherever it passed, there would only be a gentle shake of the branches which would not shed the snow on it, and a very faint mark on the snow where its footprints should be. Evidently, this person was using a profound type of qinggong.

Actually, the dot was a person who was wearing black clothes while travelling through the night.

The black clothed man's speed was extremely fast and not long later, he reached the foot of the mountain. After the black clothed man paused slightly at the base, he shot straight upwards to the top with a speed exceeding his pace while travelling on flat ground.

He soon reached a gradual incline, and paused for a moment to look at a black outline of something before sprinting towards it. As he got closer, the black thing showed itself, but wasn't it the shrine where Zhang Xiaohua had taken up lodgings for the night?!

At that moment, the black clothed man suddenly stopped, and with a snort, he pulled out an object and walked stealthily through the shrine entrance. When he entered the shrine, the black clothed man scratched his head as he peeked into the room where Zhang Xiaohua was sleeping beside a soon extinguished fire.

After listening for a while, he stepped forward and entered the room and borrowing the faint light of the bonfire, one could see a cold murderous aura emanating from the dull black dagger in the black clothed man's hands.

When the black clothed man saw the youth who was lying beside the soon extinguished fire, he heaved a sigh of relief but kept the dagger in his hands, walked a few more steps, picked up a stone from the ground and threw it towards Zhang Xiaohua. The stone collided onto Zhang Xiaohua's hands with a faint snap, but Zhang Xiaohua was currently sleeping in this moment so how would he be able to feel it?

However, his unaffected behaviour led the man to feel surprised, he carefully stepped forward and gave Zhang Xiaohua a kick, but the latter did not move at all like a dead pig. The black clothed man sighed in relief again, he thought that this person had already died so he placed his fingers under Zhang Xiaohua's nose to confirm his suspicion. Why was there still breathing? The black clothed man was slightly confused and he rocked Zhang Xiaohua's body violently, but the latter still had no reaction as he continued to sleep soundly.

Upon seeing the situation, the black clothed person ignored Zhang Xiaohua and casually threw more dried twigs into the dying bonfire, and the bonfire immediately fed on the additional fuel causing the shrine to become lit up and warmer.

Not long after, the black clothes man's expression suddenly turned vigilant and he moved his sight from the bonfire onto the shrine entrance.

Indeed, another black shadow appeared from outside carrying a gust of chilly wind with it. The wind caused the fire to waver and after then man stood still, one could see that he had a small and skinny build similarly in black night attire that covered his head not letting one see his face. The new arrival studied the shrine and looked towards Zhang Xiaohua who was sleeping beside the fire, he wrinkled his brows and said, "Youngest Mei, who is this youth?"

The black clothed man who was called youngest Mei smiled and said, "I do not know either, he was already sleeping here when I came."

The other black clothed man continued to ask, "So why did you not choose a different place?"

Youngest Mei replied in an unhappy tone, “Do you think it is so easy to find a hidden place, I have tried earlier on and this child would not wake up no matter what, and his body does not contain any inner energy, so he is most likely a village child who got lost in the mountains. Shopkeeper Liu, you are being too careful here.”

Shopkeeper Liu walked forward upon hearing this and he said, “Caution will allow one steer a thousand-year-old ship, how would I be able to live up till today if I were not careful?”

Shopkeeper Liu walked over to Zhang Xiaohua, studied for a while and gave the latter two kicks, indeed as youngest Mei had said, there was no reaction from the boy. However, he was still worried and used his fingers to press on a few acupuncture points on Zhang Xiaohua’s body before saying, “I’ll just let him sleep, but I will still feel worried if I do not lock his sleeping acupuncture point.”

Youngest Mei continued to feed the fire and said, “Alright, at least you are not worried anymore. Come over to enjoy some warmth.”

Shopkeeper Liu sat beside the bonfire and asked, “Youngest Mei, how did you find out of this place? I have been staying in Yanyu town for so long yet why did I not hear of this mountain shrine before?”

Youngest Mei said in a poor-natured tone, “It can still exist even if you have not heard of it. I chance upon this place last year when carrying out a mission in Yanyu town and was discovered by some enemies, and after being chased around into the mountains. When I came to find you, I naturally thought of this hidden place as the most suitable meeting point.”

Shopkeeper Liu smiled and said, “That is, I do not know this place so it is naturally an appropriate location. However, on a snowy night like this, only someone with your qinggong would be able to not leave tracks in the snow, I can’t do that so I cannot guarantee that no one will follow us.”

Youngest Mei “chi” in a teasing tone and said, “So what if someone else saw you? Would they know that you came to find me tonight? Will they be able to find your store?”

Shopkeeper Liu smiled and said, “Old brother is right, I am being too careful here.”

Youngest Mei replied, “There is nothing right or wrong in what you do, one must always be careful since Jianghu is full of unpredictable events and disasters. Oh, alright, let’s end with the chatter and get straight to business, has anything unusual appeared in Tan family clan?”

Shopkeeper Liu immediately retracted his smile and said, “The Tan family clan is headed in the style of a family clan, and my attempts to send spies in to infiltrate them have all failed. In order not to beat the grass and scare the snake, I did not make any further attempts. However, with my identity as storekeeper Yushi, I still have some dealings with their third young master.”

Youngest Mei did not respond, and when shopkeeper Liu saw the other’s party’s quiet countenance, he could not guess if he was happy or sad so he smiled obligingly and said, “I know that this differs vastly from your expectations, but I am indeed faced with many difficulties. Look, the low tiered disciples cannot go near the Tan family core and find anything useful, and as for the core disciples, not to mention the first and second young master, all of them are extremely sharp and smart. Even if it was Tan Wen, Tan Wu who are slightly sideliners, they have all received strict instructions since young and have made demanding requirements of themselves. Thus, it is quite difficult to pry anything out from them.”

Youngest Mei wrinkled his brow and said, “These are all facts which the superiors already knew which is why they called you in, wasn’t it because they looked up to expertise? Which is why they threw these blockheads to you? You have to demonstrate a fearless and tireless attitude to bring out the best offense and light up a “Kongming lantern” in this difficult place!”

Shopkeeper Liu asked in a surprised tone, “About this, old brother Mei, what is a “Kongming lantern”?”

Youngest Mei smiled and said, “Old brother Liu, you are too detached from the times. The “Kongming lantern” refers to a lantern that can be set to fly in the sky, which is much better than the results you have produced so far.”

Shopkeeper Liu cupped his hands and said, “Admirable, admirable, old brother Mei. As the saying goes, “Not seeing someone for three days is enough for him to surpass one’s previous opinion”, your standard has risen after undergoing

training from the headquarters.”

Youngest Mei also seemed pleased as he cupped his hands back and replied, “This is due to the grace of our leader for which both of us have to be grateful for. If you perform well this time round, perhaps the leader will reward you accordingly.”

Upon hearing this, shopkeeper Liu quickly walked to the front of the other party and took out an item from his breast before placing it carefully in front of youngest Mei. He smiled and said, “Old brother Mei, this is a piece of antique jade that I found in the village, it keeps warm in the winter and cool in the summer, would old brother please accept it as a casual gift.”

When youngest Mei saw shopkeeper Liu handed over the object to him, he received it without hesitation and said, “Old brother Liu is so kind to pay heed to this little hobby of mine, just based on his fact alone, it is impossible for you to not advance.”

Shopkeeper Liu said humbly, “What does this little gift of mine count as, its brilliance is like a firefly compared to the moon that is this younger brother of mine, but I hope you can put in a few good words for me in the future.”

Youngest Mei caressed the object in his hands and smiled, he said, “The leader’s eyes are impartial and he could naturally reward when you make a contribution and punish when you fail. If old brother Liu has produced some results, perhaps this brother can shine more light on them?”

Shopkeeper Liu replied, “Wouldn’t that depend on our leader’s instructions and old brother’s recommendation?”

Youngest Mei smiled without saying anything else while playing with the antique jade in his hands.

Shopkeeper Liu saw that he had achieved his aim so he continued, “However, for the past few days, there seemed to be a spider silk thin lead according to what I heard from the Tan family third young master.”

Youngest Mei smiled and said, “Why don’t you say it, perhaps there will be something noteworthy this time.”

Shopkeeper Liu explained, “According to the Tan family third young master, for

the period slightly before and after the new year, the Tan family will be sending a few of their disciples for many different missions. The Tan family third young master also felt strange, even though there were tasks to be completed outside the family on usual occasions, most of them would be scattered at different times so the sudden influx of missions also led him to be puzzled.”

Youngest Mei asked, “Did you ask him if he knew what the missions were?”

Shopkeeper Liu smiled obligingly and said, “How would I dare ask such a sensitive question? However, from what he hinted, I believe that he is unaware and was scolded when he asked the family head. Hehe, if he was not unhappy with the scolding he received, I doubt he would tell me about it either.”

Youngest Mei continued to ask, “Since the third young master is kept out of the loop, does the first or second young master know about it? They did have any reaction? Were they also sent out in the mission?”

Shopkeeper Liu shook his head and said, “Not that I know of, they are both staying within the Tan family during this period.”

Youngest Mei wrinkled his brows and said, “In that case, this situation is indeed quite strange. If there was really a problem, the first and second young masters would go out personally to deal with it, but if they remained in the house, perhaps the family has suddenly encountered some earth-shattering problem from within. Carefully investigate this matter and let me know if you find anything useful.”

Shopkeeper Liu smiled and said, “Old brother Mei is eminent.”

Youngest Mei smiled as he replied, “Old brother Liu, there is no need to be so courteous. After all, we were once brothers who slept on the same bed, and even though our positions are different now and we each have our own responsibilities, this type of work still has to be done and you are still a stone in the foundation of our group. Therefore, there is no need to be so polite when we are together by ourselves.”

Shopkeeper Liu smiled and said, “I do not dare, this elder brother cannot run as far as you can, so I should still listen to your instructions honestly.”

Youngest Mei only smiled back without forcing his view on the other party.

Sometime later, shopkeeper Liu suddenly recalled something and said, “Oh right, old brother Mei, there seemed to be another matter but I do not know if it is useful to report about.”

Youngest Mei smiled and said, “There is no harm in sharing it, I can help you analyse the situation as well.”

Shopkeeper Liu said, “Sometime earlier, the Tan family third young master briefly mentioned that his two elder brothers would practice martial arts with him in the past, but since the coming of the year, they no longer practiced at the same place with the third young master and would not even exchange pointers with him. Sometimes when he tried to look for his two elder brothers for a match, they would find an excuse to reject him causing him to feel confused. However, he seemed to have heard from the disciples guarding the door that his two elder brothers’ martial arts have improved tremendously and have become the top and second leader of the Tan family younger generation.”

After speaking up to here, shopkeeper Liu sneaked a glance at youngest Mei and said, “However, the third young master felt that all this talk was hogwash as the three of them were already learning the best martial arts inherited from the family since young, so being the top and second top in martial arts among the younger generation was extremely normal. Old brother Mei, do you think this news is useful?”

Youngest Mei replied, “Old brother Liu, this news is extremely important, I will have to report it to our leader personally, and you should be rewarded accordingly as well.”

Shopkeeper Liu replied in an ecstatic tone, “Many thanks to old brother Mei in that case.”

However, his expression became slightly puzzled and he asked, “Does old brother Mei know something else, this news does not seem to be anything special to me at all.”

Youngest Mei laughed as he said, “Haha, old brother Liu, this is the difference between the intelligence in the headquarters and branches, the time we received the same news will differ from your branches. I shall be honest with you; do you know why you were dispatched from elsewhere to this Tan family’s

village?”

Shopkeeper Liu shook his head blankly.

Youngest Mei whispered, “The leader has a friend whom he is not very close with, and the friend has some bad blood with Tan Yefeng. However, the gap between their martial arts was quite wide with Tan Yefeng being the weaker party so the latter could never vent his frustration. Who knew that just last year, our leader received news from that old friend of his that Tan Yefeng had beaten him sorely. Our leader felt puzzled on how Tan Yefeng’s martial arts skill could improve so vastly in such a short period, which is why he called us brothers to investigate the matter, and that is why old brother Liu was implicated in this matter.”

Thus, shopkeeper Liu became enlightened on the matter.

Youngest Mei continued to whisper, “This matter has to be kept in absolute secrecy, I have told it to you because I was afraid that you would throw away any useful information without realizing so. I hope that old brother will help me keep this a secret and to be more attentive in the future, after all if you can contribute more useful information, won’t it be easier for me to recommend more rewards to you?”

Shopkeeper Liu quickly bowed towards the other party, he replied, “I understand now, since there is so much at stake, I will not try to catch fish with bare hands in the waters anymore. I believe that the Tan family’s third young master as the crack in their well, I will not let down the expectations our leader and old brother Mei placed on me.”

Youngest Mei nodded his head in approval.

The two men continued to chat for much longer until a sliver of white colour of a fish’s belly appeared in the sky, and the two men went down the mountain and departed from each other.

Even though the two men were exchanging information that was of utmost secrecy, they only sealed Zhang Xiaohua’s sleeping acupuncture point and treated him as a dead animal without sparing him any attention throughout their conversation. Even when they left, they did not clear the traces of additional firewood they fed the bonfire with and left unworriedly.

Actually, the black clothed person youngest Mei who entered the shrine earlier had no intentions of letting Zhang Xiaohua live until daybreak, but he ended up not even bothering to take a second glance at Zhang Xiaohua's face. After all, the boy was only a lost village child who might die easily wherever he went, so what were the chances of him surviving through this ordeal anyway?

Nevertheless, the other black clothed man shopkeeper Liu was careful and he first sealed Zhang Xiaohua's sleeping acupuncture point. He was well aware of the effects, the sealed point will not dissolve within twenty-four hours so the two men began to talk freely beside the bonfire and even when it was about to be extinguished, they did not feed it more sticks. After a whole day and night in this temperature where water would turn into ice, which normal person was able to survive through this time?

From youngest Mei and shopkeeper Liu's perspective, no matter how this boy managed to come to this mountain shrine, his fate was doomed ever since he chose to lodge there for the night, and even if he did not silence to prevent word from spreading out, the boy would still perish under the chill of the winter.

Just when youngest Mei was about to clean up all evidence of their meeting, he was invited by shopkeeper Liu to leave first, so how would he not be embarrassed to instruct shopkeeper Liu to handle the matter properly? Hence, he departed first to let the other party know that he trusted the way the latter handled such matters.

As for killing the witness to remove all traces of their secret encounter, it was something as simple and trivial as killing a fly so they never put it to heart. However, it never crossed their mind that this youth who was lost in the mountains managed to find somewhere to stay for the night after much difficulties, and since he slept like a log without hindrance to any of them, why should they not spare his life? Instead, why leave him there with the sleeping acupuncture sealed causing him to freeze to his death? If they were going to kill him off that way, then they might as well silence him earlier to save the boy of his suffering.

Unfortunately for them, good people would be rewarded by the heavens and after the two men left, the sky began to brighten and a ray of sunlight shone into the shrine and over the Zhang Xiaohua whose sleeping acupuncture was sealed.

When Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes as usual, a bright flash appeared in his pupils and he stretched his body, sat upright and looked at his surroundings. The temperature in the room had already fallen quite low and only then did he remember the events of the previous day. He rejoiced in his heart for finding this mountain shrine for without it, he did not know if he was able to live through the entire night.

After he took some snow from outside to wipe his face, Zhang Xiaohua recomposed himself and began to practice his martial arts again until his body felt comfortable. Afterwards, he ate some of the leftover dry rations and went down the mountain to continue his search for the nearest town.

When Zhang Xiaohua exited the mountain shrine and looked at the snow white mountain, Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows severely and thought, this master Jing Xuan had almost killed him, how was he supposed to find whichever place she described to him, and now that he had reached this mountain after a day of walking, where was he supposed to head to next?

Just as he was lamenting in his heart, Zhang Xiaohua's eyes suddenly brightened because at the steps of the mountain shrine, he noticed several traces of footsteps!

The small footsteps naturally belonged to Zhang Xiaohua, but beside it was rather large ones that were probably left behind by some visitors to the shrine. Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of excitement, since he arrived at the shrine in the night on the previous day, he naturally could not see the footprints but now that it was daylight again, these prints could point the direction of where he should head to. This mountain shrine has to be quite good at granting wished for people to come to such a desolate place to offer their prayers.

However, he did not seem to see any statues to offer prayers to in the shrine.

Even if there were no statues, why would Zhang Xiaohua bother about such a minor detail? He was grateful to the shrine for having believers who are devout enough to come all the way to such a desolate area to offer their prayers. Thus, Zhang Xiaohua kept his belongings and followed the footprints to look for the nearest town.

At the very least, he should be able to find some civilization.

Chapter 135: Restaurant

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Restaurant

Zhang Xiaohua followed the footsteps from the mountain shrine to descend from the mountain.

However, he soon realized that the footsteps belonged to two people, one with a deep imprint and another with a light trail. Nevertheless, they both had a common similarity because they were both widely spaced, the distance between each footstep was enough for Zhang Xiaohua to walk several footsteps. Zhang Xiaohua was astonished, how could someone's legs be so long?

Furthermore, when he got down the mountain, the person also went somewhere steep but Zhang Xiaohua was unable to climb the slope so he had no choice but to look for a gentler slope to climb before tracing the footsteps again.

After walking for some while, Zhang Xiaohua finally understood everything. Because there was a small forest at the base of the mountain, when he walked to the front of the forest, the footsteps disappeared and reappeared at the other side of the forest. By that time, Zhang Xiaohua who had dipped his feet in the world of Jianghu knew enough to know that the footsteps he was following belonged to a martial art expert.

However, why did these martial art experts come to visit this mountain shrine? Zhang Xiaohua was not interested in the reason though, he was only concerned if these tracks would lead him back to civilization.

After walking for another half a bell, Zhang Xiaohua found himself in another problematic situation, the two set of footsteps separated and trailed off in different directions.

In this difficult situation where he had to choose one out of the two, Zhang

Xiaohua did not hesitate and picked the correct answer immediately.

Why?

Just by using his legs to think, Zhang Xiaohua knew that the person with the deeper imprints on the ground was not as skilled as the person with the lighter footstep traces. If the latter whose qinggong was better became excited and flew too far ahead, wouldn't his footsteps become untraceable and Zhang Xiaohua's effort gone to waste?

Since he had made his mind up, Zhang Xiaohua continued to follow the "never met before" martial art expert and walked in the direction of where the sun was rising from.

These footsteps did not let Zhang Xiaohua down, even though they were not very deep, it was still enough for Zhang Xiaohua to notice and follow, and throughout the route, there was no difficult passage of up and down inclines which made Zhang Xiaohua feel grateful to no end. Thus, he was unaware that at that moment, the shopkeeper who wanted Zhang Xiaohua to freeze to death was cursing in his heart at the dog poo youngest Mei for choosing such an out of the way location to meetup, didn't he know how cold the weather was? Thanks to that, he had caught a cold and needed to spend some money to visit a physician.

When it was close to noon, Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly hungry but he only brought a little dry rations to be meant for a single meal, and now that he had no idea where he was and his food was already finished, he would have to spend the night with an empty stomach if he still could not reach civilization by that day. Just as Zhang Xiaohua's thoughts began to run wild, he suddenly saw a line of smoke blowing from the front side of the horizon and felt a wave of joy swept over his body. He immediately turned towards its direction and ran towards the smoke while ignoring the footsteps he was following earlier.

The immediate consequence was that shopkeeper Liu who was about to leave his store with money in his hands immediately stopped sneezing. He shook his head and rubbed his nose before thinking to himself, "Perhaps there is really karma in this world. I did not kill the village child in the mountain shrine personally and let him freeze to death after sealing his acupuncture point. In

comparison, I should have simply ended his life immediately, so I would not accumulate interest on my bad karma and spend money to visit a physician. It seems that I have to learn from those upper people and kill upon sight without any mercy, because that is what a real expert would do.”

When Zhang Xiaohua left the trail he was following and headed in the direction of the smoke, he passed by a mountain route and crossed a bridge before finally reaching a small town in the rural countryside in the afternoon.

As he looked from afar at the small town and the surrounding houses as well as the cattle being reared by these households, Zhang Xiaohua felt a wave of emotion as he finally found his way back into civilization. He no longer had to worry about spending the night in the wilderness or enduring hunger anymore.

Zhang Xiaohua took quick steps along the small path that led to the town. The town was a typical countryside town which was smaller than Lu town by several times. Now that it was the New Year, there were many people on the streets wearing their new clothes and carrying smiling expressions on their faces, and the atmosphere was overall lively and harmonious. There were many youths who were of the same age as Zhang Xiaohua carrying incense or New Year goodies in their hands, it was a typical sight during the New Year.

Even though the way Zhang Xiaohua was dressed could not be considered tattered and worn, it was not tidy and considered inappropriate for the occasion. When the townsfolk saw him, they gave the boy strange gazes since no matter how poor a family was, they should still be able to afford an exchange of clothes for their children. As for children like Zhang Xiaohua who had no new clothes to wear, they were few and sparse so by the looks of it, they thought that he must be a village orphan.

Why would Zhang Xiaohua care about how the others viewed him?

He was only concerned with finding a place to eat, but after searching for a while, he suddenly realized that it was currently the New Year so all the shops were celebrating with decorations and most were not opened for business, so where was he going to buy what he needed? Zhang Xiaohua secretly felt the coins in his money pouch and could not help but smiled bitterly, he had never been in possession of so much money before but now that he was, he still had to

bear his hunger, the heavens were really unfair this time.

Seeing that most of the shops were closed for the New Year, Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly, must he wait until the sixth day of the New Year before he could buy something to eat? He highly doubted if he could still survive until that day.

Zhang Xiaohua sighed deeply, this could not do, he had to find a household and knock on their door to purchase some food from them.

At that moment, a twenty plus year old youth was walking from the opposite direction wearing bright clothes while even humming to a tune, Zhang Xiaohua quickly ran to his front and cupped his hands in greeting, "Excuse me for a while, elder brother."

The person was naturally feeling irritated for being interrupted from whatever he was doing, and when he saw this poor village child in front of him, he frowned even harder and cursed his own luck, was this child a beggar who wanted money from him? Since it was the New Year, it was inauspicious to deny his request, yet he was still unwilling to part with his money, and thus, he went into a dilemma.

The young man asked, "What is the matter?"

At the same time, he reached his hand into his breast to fish out a coin which he could use if the other party was begging for money.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he asked, "May I know, elder brother, what is the time now?"

The person was surprised, so this child was not asking for money, his heart lightened and he smiled back in reply, "It is three quarters to noon."

After finishing his sentence, when he was about to walk away Zhang Xiaohua asked again, "Pardon me, elder brother, you have mistaken my question, I wanted to ask which day is it today?"

The person became even more surprised, he studied Zhang Xiaohua from head to toe before asking, "Has this little brother caught a fever, how can you not know what day it is?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled obligingly and replied, "I strayed into the mountains and have lost track of the outside world, and thus, I do not know what year it is

now.”

The person could tell from Zhang Xiaohua’s manner of speech that he was unordinary so he became respectful and replied in a serious tone, “Today is the sixth day of the twenty third year in the new haven, may I know when this little brother entered the mountains?”

Zhang Xiaohua cupped his hands and replied in a mannerly tone, “About the beginning of the twelfth lunar month of the twenty second year in the new haven.”

The person smiled in reply, “Admirable, admirable indeed! Such a rare fortune has been bestowed in you.”

Zhang Xiaohua snickered secretly in his heart and asked again, “I would still like to ask elder brother, is there any place I can go to buy something to eat in this town? Anything is fine as long as it can satisfy my stomach.”

When the person was about to speak, his eyes suddenly gleamed and smiled, “Where would you find shops that are still opened during the New Year? However, since little brother’s requirements aren’t high, there is indeed a place you can go to.”

Zhang Xiaohua joyfully replied, “Would this elder brother elaborate further?”

The person pointed to afar and said, “If you walk straight ahead and turn left at the junction, then turn right at a grocery store, there will be a restaurant at the end of the street which might be open today. If it is not open, then I am afraid this little brother would have to endure his hunger.”

After listening to the other person’s advice, Zhang Xiaohua thanked him profusely and ran along the street in the direction he was guided to.

Behind him, the youth pursed his lips before breaking out into laughter as he walked away.

When Zhang Xiaohua reached the restaurant that he was given directions to, he could not help but feel dazed at the scene before him.

It was not because the restaurant was not open, but rather because the restaurant had long lines of people queueing to get it, and the entire place was

bustling with customers. Actually, the restaurant was the most prosperous eatery in the entire town and since the New Year was a period when it was busiest, why would they not open their doors?

Except that Zhang Xiaohua was not expecting to visit one.

Not accounting the fact that Zhang Xiaohua had never eaten in a restaurant his entire life, even during the journey to Pingyang city when the horse carriage would stop at pit stops, Zhang Xiaohu would order their food for them, not to mention that the customers in this restaurant either came via their own private carriages, or were dressed in silks and satin, and ordered their food in excess. Evidently, the clientele for this restaurant named 'food as sky' was quite high class so Zhang Xiaohua deliberated if he should enter the restaurant or not.

While he was deliberating, his stomach rumbled like a wild beast.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua toughened his hide and walked up to the restaurant.

The restaurant had a waiter at the door welcoming the guests and when the waiter saw a village youth walked hesitatingly towards his direction, he could not help but wrinkle his brows and muttered in his heart, "Village kid, can't you tell what kind of place this is, why do you even send yourself up to the door?"

Just as he was about to give Zhang Xiaohua a good scolding as the latter walked up the stairs, he realized that Zhang Xiaohua's clothes were not made of the common material worn by the villages even though it was old. The waiter had sharp sight indeed, and he studied Zhang Xiaohua's attire carefully and ascertained that the clothes were tailored to his size so it must not have been stolen, so even though they were not new clothes, he could not make out the boy's identity. Hence, he quickly changed his frown into an obliging smile and asked, "This little brother, may I know why you have come to this restaurant?"

Zhang Xiaohua saw the waiter's response and thought secretly that he was quite professional for treating him properly despite his young age.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "I have come to the restaurant to eat, why else would I come here for?"

The waiter's face turned red, that's right, he assumed that the child had no money to spend and came over instead to look for someone or ask about some

matter, but never expected that he could come to the restaurant to purchase a meal. As the saying goes, one cannot judge a book by the cover, he could not look down upon this child as he turned out to be quite wealthy after all.

Hence, the waiter hurriedly bowed and motioned Zhang Xiaohua to enter the restaurant.

When Zhang Xiaohua entered the restaurant, it was an eye-opener for him because even though it was no longer the peak period for a meal, the restaurant was still crowded with almost no free seats. Zhang Xiaohua was at a loss of where to go and the waiter smiled beside him as he said, “Does this customer wish to go to the second level where the lounges are?”

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua thought secretly, “Trying to push me to spend money? Who knows if there is an additional charge or minimum spending to sit on the second floor, and even though he had not gone to a restaurant before, as the saying goes, “does one need to see a live pig to know what it tastes like?” The books have written about such sharp business methods that some restaurants partake in, and he would never allow himself to fall into such a trap.

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua quickly raised his hands and said, “Here is fine, it is livelier.”

The waiter did not insist so he found a small table and guided Zhang Xiaohua to sit there.

Afterwards, the waiter poured a pot of tea and brought over the menu to let Zhang Xiaohua select his choices. As for the famous specialties written on the menu, Zhang Xiaohua was not quite sure what that meant but he could understand the prices written below their names, so he flipped the menu page by page but even up till the end, he pursed his lips and wondered why the prices were so high, and what food were they serving here because he was unwilling to spend his money.

When the waiter saw Zhang Xiaohua flipped through the entire menu and still not decided on what to order, he smiled and said, “If this customer is unsatisfied with our selection, our restaurant still has some special secret dishes that I can suggest to your liking.”

In a single breath, the waiter called out several fanciful names which made Zhang Xiaohua surprised, this restaurant was indeed different from others, even the names of their dishes sound like songs. However, when he casually asked for the price of one of them, he was immediately stunned because it was much more expensive than the dishes listed in the menu.

Zhang Xiaohua rolled his eyes and asked, "Waiter, how do you sell plain rice in this restaurant."

The waiter was surprised and he answered thoughtlessly, "Plain rice is free of charge."

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua became thrilled, he immediately clapped his hands and said, "Alright, I want this, bring me five large bowls of plain rice!"

Gosh..... the waiter choked and he almost threw the menu that Zhang Xiaohua was holding. If they were not surrounded by so many guests and if he was not afraid of disrupting the restaurant's business, the waiter would have immediately grabbed Zhang Xiaohua by the neck and throw him out ruthlessly. Was this boy fooling around with him?

Seeing the angry expression on the waiter's face, Zhang Xiaohua became surprised but he put on a smiling expression to ask, "Waiter, what are you waiting for, why don't you get to work and bring me my plain rice?"

The waiter clenched his teeth and smiled obligingly, he said, "Customer, the plain rice is free of charge but you have to order some accompanying dishes along with it."

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned, he said, "You did not mention that previously."

The waiter lowered his head and said, "That was my oversight, please bear with it."

Zhang Xiaohua asked, "So I have to order a dish?"

The waiter replied, "Yes."

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, "Are you sure? I have to order a dish?"

The waiter answered confidently, "Yes, I am extremely sure of it."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Haha, if you don't mention it, how would I

know that I have to order something else as well? Since you say so, I shall just order a dish. Alright, give me this.”

Zhang Xiaohua pointed to the cheapest “spicy chicken cubes” on the menu.

When the waiter saw his choice, he asked, “Is this customer sure of his choice?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, “Yes, I want to order that as well.”

The waiter asked, “Will you definitely not regret your decision?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “I won’t, I am a man of my words. As the saying goes, a quick horse will not be able to chase after a gentleman’s words, that saying would be referring to this.”

The waiter nodded and asked, “So will the customer not be ordering anything else.”

Zhang Xiaohua shook his head and said, “That is unnecessary, however, I still want those five bowls of plain rice.”

Hence, the waiter kept back the menu and said, “Please wait for a moment.” He then left with this chest full of anger.

After the waiter left, Zhang Xiaohua poured himself a cup of water and gulped it down immediately. After finishing the cup, he still felt unsatisfied and drank another three consecutive cups before cooling off. He thought, “This tea from the restaurant is still pretty ordinary and is far off from the spring water in my house. However, it seems to be free so I will have to drink more of it.”

However, just as he was about to pour himself a fourth cup, Zhang Xiaohua realized that the pot was empty so he called out, “Waiter, can you refill more tea?”

The waiter just went into the kitchen and passed the order to the chef when he heard Zhang Xiaohua called him over, his heart became puzzled as he remembered refilling the pot of tea for this customer earlier on? Had he remembered wrongly?

When the waiter refilled the pot again, Zhang Xiaohua poured himself another full cup and drank it before turning his head to study his surroundings.

It was already long past mealtime so most of the customers in the restaurant were idling while chatting over some wine. Zhang Xiaohua was seated close to a table of five well-fitted heroes who were drinking wine while chatting.

Perhaps because they were seated not far apart, or because those heroes had loud voices, Zhang Xiaohua still managed to overhear their conversation despite not intending to do so.

He heard, "Curses, it is the New Year now so how did I get transferred over to this poor and backward place, what kind of life do I have to pass here?"

Another person said, "That's right, I would still get to spend my past New Years with my wife and children, yet how did we end up at such a distant place this year?"

The first person said, "What choice do we have, the client said it was urgent so we have no choice but to work over the New Year."

The other person replied, "However, the remuneration isn't bad this time, it is double of before."

Someone else said, "What rubbish are you spouting, the official rules are that holidays should pay thrice the normal salary, so where did the excess go?"

The other person answered, "Really? How come I am unaware of it, this won't do, I will have a good chat with head Zhang and not let us be taken advantage of."

The first person said, "Head Zhang is still new so even though he has some prestige recently, he still will not be able to overturn the station's head's decision. It is better if we investigate this personally."

The other person replied, "But we still got to let him know at least, perhaps he is unaware of it himself."

The first person said, "That is fine as well, head Zhang is quite cool usually and he treats people well, so perhaps there might be some results by talking to him."

Another voice said, "Let's discuss this later when we get back, isn't the restaurant a place for us to drink instead? Only after we finish this job quickly can we go back and fight for our rights. In this backwards town, only the wine in

this restaurant is up to standard, there isn't even a place to drink some flowered wine."

The first person said, "There will definitely be one somewhere, but would it be to our liking? Furthermore, it is the New Year now so they will have to go back home as well, so how many will still be around to wait for you to patronize them?"

The few men then continued talking about some adult things that Zhang Xiaohua could understand now that he was older, but his ears still turned red and he immediately covered them and drank his water continuously to distract himself. Without realizing it, the teapot became empty again.

Zhang Xiaohua had no choice but to call out again, "Waiter, refill my pot."

Chapter 136: Blackmail

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Blackmail

When the waiter finally brought the tray and served Zhang Xiaohua his spicy diced chicken cubes and five bowls of rice, Zhang Xiaohua had finished three pots of tea and his stomach was grumbling loudly in hunger.

However, when Zhang Xiaohua saw the dish that was filled with chillies and menacingly red oily chicken, he became stunned and asked dumbly, "Waiter, is this the dish that I ordered?"

The waiter smiled as he replied, "Customer, you are absolutely right, this is our restaurant's famous and reasonably priced spicy chicken cubes which brings numbness from its spiciness, and is extremely delicious. People who loves spicy food will find this a staple in our restaurant."

Zhang Xiaohua frowned, that was right, the menu clearly stated that it was numb and spicy so why did he not inquire more before ordering? The waiter even asked him a few times to ascertain his order yet he had not noticed any abnormalities.

Sigh, that was the price of being too cheapskate.

Perhaps this dish was really delicious but Zhang Xiaohua was afraid of spicy food.

However, there was no other choice, he could not possibly ask for another dish, and would they not waste even more money? Zhang Xiaohua hardened his skin and picked up the utensils, carefully placed a piece of the diced chicken cubes in his mouth and almost immediately, he could feel a burning sensation that rose all the way to his head. His eyes began to water so Zhang Xiaohua hurriedly gobbled mouthful of rice before the burning sensation subsided

slightly. Following this, Zhang Xiaohua gulped large sips of tea before taking another bite of the dish.

Even though the spicy diced chicken cubes were extremely spicy, it was still a good dish and with Zhang Xiaohua's penny-pinching and patient mentality, he finally finished the dish along with six large bowls of plain rice and another two pots of tea.

Zhang Xiaohua picked up his chopsticks, dug around the dish, and when he realized that he had finished all the chicken, he put his chopsticks down in relief. Even though Zhang Xiaohua initially wanted to finish the chillies in the dish as well, he gave up the idea when he thought of the burning sensation still lingering in his mouth. He then stroked his stomach, feeling extremely full from the meal.

Since he finished his meal, the bill naturally had to be settled so Zhang Xiaohua raised his arm to signal the waiter. Actually, the waiter had been keeping Zhang Xiaohua in his sight since the latter began eating, and after he finished his meal, the waiter paid even more attention to him. Zhang Xiaohua's behaviour from before was extremely suspicious, even though he ate his food heartily, he might sneak off in the middle of the meal and leave without paying for it. If that happened, the bill would be passed to the waiter to settle, so how could the waiter not pay close attention to Zhang Xiaohua?

At that moment, the waiter was feeling even more cautious when he saw Zhang Xiaohua signalling to settle his bill, he was afraid that the latter would nitpick about the dish and refuse to pay. Hence, he remained worried until Zhang Xiaohua asked him for the price. Hearing the question, the waiter smiled in relief and replied, "Customer, have you finished your food? It costs fifty coins in total."

"Fifty coins?" Zhang Xiaohua asked in a strange tone, "Why is it so expensive. I remembered that it costs forty-five coins in the menu."

The waiter smiled obligingly and said, "Customer did not see wrongly, the spicy chicken diced cubes costs forty-five coins."

"So why are you charging me fifty coins?" Zhang Xiaohua asked, "Wasn't the rice free of charge?"

The waiter replied, "Yes, customer, but the pot of tea costs five coins as well."

“What?” Zhang Xiaohua almost jumped off his seat as he said, “The water costs money as well? Why didn’t you tell me?”

The waiter showed a helpless expression as he replied, “You didn’t ask me, customer, beverages are not free, and even the authorities are aware of it, don’t you know? How would I know that you don’t know this?”

Zhang Xiaohua was speechless, he had taken much precaution to ensure they he did not get ripped off but was still charged more than he expected, fortunately the tea was charged based on per pax and not on the number of refills. If not, wouldn’t he have been taken advantage of?

Hence, Zhang Xiaohua did not question the waiter any further, he felt around his breast and took out the money pouch, searched inside for a while and took out a small broken piece of silver before passing it to the waiter.

The waiter was bewildered again, the boy who he initially thought would dash off without paying had unexpectedly paid the bill without much trouble, but even when he wanted to settle the bill, it was only fifty coins so a copper coin was sufficient yet he brought out a piece of silver which looked as heavy as three to five silver coins, was the customer fooling around with him?

The waiter barely maintained his composure and replied with a slight frown on his face, “Customer, the bill is only fifty coins, don’t you have any coppers? Or perhaps a smaller piece of silver?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied with a straight face, “I do not have coppers, and this is the smallest piece of silver I have.”

The waiter almost fainted on the spot, what kind of person was this. The customer obviously had more silvers in his money pouch and was a little rich child, yet why was he so stingy with his choices? Not only did he ordered a single dish of spicy chicken cubes, he even asked for six free bowls of rice, oh right, and four refills of tea, and even complained over the additional five coins charged.

Not only was the waiter troubled, when he took the silver piece and brought it to the counter, his actions caught the attention of the man beside Zhang Xiaohua. The man had only ordered a plate of peanuts and a jar of wine and was drinking to himself while his eyes darted left and right across the restaurant. Zhang Xiaohua did not enter his view while the former was eating but when he

took out the money pouch and even said that the silver bit was the smallest piece he had to the waiter, the man's eyes flashed brightly.

Not long after, the waiter returned with a string of copper coins placed on another small tray. He placed the tray on Zhang Xiaohua's table, took out another smaller broken piece of silver and said, "Customer, this is your change of four silvers and some copper coins, please keep them well."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled gleefully at the copper coins and said, "Are these coppers sufficient? Does that silver piece cover enough change as well?"

The waiter put on a righteous expression and said, "Customer, you can question my personal integrity but not the reputation of our 'food as the sky' restaurant. Unscrupulous methods such as short-changing our customers will never happen within the confines of this place."

Zhang Xiaohua replied, "In that case, I will believe you. Oh right, waiter, I would like to ask if you know where the Pingyang city is?"

"Pingyang city?" The waiter scratched his head and said, "Customer, this waiter has only heard of Pingcheng city, Yiyang city as well as Yu city, but I have not come across this Pingyang city before."

Zhang Xiaohua was dumbfounded.

Pingyang city was the largest city he had ever been to yet this waiter who had seen and known much have not heard of it. How far had he actually floated down the river?

Zhang Xiaohua immediately stood up and asked in a slightly agitated tone, "In that case, is there a carriage service called Biaochi in this town?"

"Biaochi carriage service?" The waiter scratched his head again and smiled, "There is indeed a carriage station in the town but it is called Feichi. If customer is looking for it, you can turn left from the door and walk straight ahead."

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua quickly kept the smaller piece of silver back into his money pouch and was about to keep the string of copper coins into his breast when he seemed to have recalled something, took out a coin, pondered for another moment and took out another coin and placed them in the waiter's hands. He said, "This is for you, thanks for your service."

The waiter did not know whether to laugh or cry when he saw the two coins in his hands, he did not know if he should accept them or not. The restaurant he worked in was quite prestigious and the customers were all affluent so the tips he received were either in fives or tens of coppers, when will he receive two copper coins as a tip?

However, when he thought back to the customer's earlier behaviour, two coins was much aplenty so he smiled and replied, "Many thanks for your patronage!"

His words were actually sincere this time.

However, Zhang Xiaohua who was rushing out of the restaurant turned around and replied, "Waiter, if the tea costs money again, please remember to remind me so in the future."

"Dang" The waiter fainted at the restaurant door.

When Zhang Xiaohua left the 'food as sky' restaurant, he hurried over in the direction of the carriage station and was oblivious to the waiter who had injured himself behind him. Furthermore, he did not notice that when the waiter was settling his bill, the man in the corner had also settled his bill earlier and left the restaurant when he heard the waiter talked about the carriage station.

Zhang Xiaohua left the restaurant and turned left, raised his head and saw that there was a large courtyard at the end of the street with a large banner so he guessed that it must be the location of the carriage station that the waiter mentioned earlier. Seeing that it was quite far ahead, Zhang Xiaohua quickened his pace.

In this unfamiliar town, Zhang Xiaohua immediately thought of the carriage station when he wanted to return. Obviously, since the waiter had no idea where Pingyang city was, he must be extremely far from there and if he were to continue his journey on foot, then who knows when he would reach back home?

Zhang Xiaohua took the horse carriage on his very first journey into the world, so the idea of using the carriage station services came immediately to him. Thus, one cannot deny that the truth of 'reading a thousand books and travelling a hundred li.'

After walking for some while, Zhang Xiaohua saw that there was only a

junction left before he reached the entrance of the carriage station, and he could also read the words clearly on the banner that wrote “Feichi carriage station, we will reach our destination.”

Just as Zhang Xiaohua crossed the junction, a middle-aged man who, perhaps due to the slippery road from the snow, collided onto him. The moment their bodies contacted each other, Zhang Xiaohua suddenly felt a hand reached into his breast and was about to take the money pouch. Zhang Xiaohua was extremely sensitive and his actions were nimble so he immediately stopped, used his left hand to grab onto the person’s hands and said, “What are you trying to do?”

When the middle-aged man saw that he was caught by Zhang Xiaohua, he did not become flustered and purposely slipped and fell into a sitting position in front of Zhang Xiaohua before shouting out loud, “Oh my, this rascal, what are you so careless to collide onto me? Oh my, I am injured.”

After saying that, he lay on the floor and groaned loudly.

Zhang Xiaohua’s hands were still holding on to the man’s wrist but the latter was lying on the ground in front of him which made him at a loss of what to do.

Right at that moment, he heard quite a few voices and when he turned around to look, he saw six to seven youths who were slightly older than Zhang Xiaohua with taunting smiles on their faces who said as they walked over, “Where did this beggar come from, and how dare he knock our elder brother Fan?”

Now that the situation had progressed liked this, how could Zhang Xiaohua who had abundant experience in thievery not know what was going on?

However, the current Zhang Xiaohua was not like in the past, not to mention that he had his own small sword and killed a black clothed martial art expert, he was not afraid of this group of youths just based on his mastery of the heavenly dipper fist martial art.

Hence, he let go of the man’s wrist and folded his arms while he waited for the people to come over confidently.

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua was no longer the bumbling and ignorant village youth.

The middle-aged elder brother Fan laughed secretly as he saw the group of youths walked over to surround Zhang Xiaohua and remained on the ground even after Zhang Xiaohua let go of his wrist.

As for the few passers-by, they avoided the scene as though there was a pack of wild dogs around, whereas those who had slightly more courage stood from afar and threw pitiful glances at Zhang Xiaohua. Those that were cowardly had long run off in fear that the hooligans would turn their attention on themselves.

When the group of youths walked over and surrounded Zhang Xiaohua, the middle-aged man then opened his mouth and said, "This little brother, you slipped and caused me to get injured, so what do you think you should do now that I am unable to get up?"

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the youths around him before smiling towards the elder brother Fan and said, "This elder brother, I was walking very normally even though my pace was slightly fast. You were also the one who collided onto me so the person who got injured should be me instead."

The elder brother Fan replied in a higher tone, "Even if your words sound reasonable, who do you think is lying on the floor right now?"

Zhang Xiaohua replied calmly, "There is so much snow on the ground, I have no intention of getting wet, who knows why you are so weird to want to sit on this kind of wet and dirty places?"

The elder brother Fan smiled and said, "Little brother's words are quite cold, but what has happened can be witnessed by all these people here, so you cannot shrug off any responsibility so simply."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "Sigh, since it has come to this, and we cannot agree with each other, then let's go to the authorities to settle this matter then."

Upon hearing this, the elder brother Fan sat up and smiled, "Little brother, since you say so, you must be a person with poor morals"

Zhang Xiaohua asked, "So what should I do if I am morally upright? And what should I do if I am not?"

The wretched elder brother Fan said in his sharp voice, "Haha, that's right,

little brother. If you are morally upright person, then it is best if you hand over that money pouch in your breast obediently to us. Since we are not heartless people, we can leave you alone after we are done. And if you have poor morals? Hehe, just look at all these spectators who are so righteous and forthcoming.”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed back as he replied, “Haha, if these people are so righteous, why would they be putting on an act with you?”

Elder brother Fan smiled as he said, “Because I am part of the righteous group.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “So why don’t I think that you are so no matter how much I look at you?”

Upon hearing this, elder brother Fan shouted impatiently, “It seems that this little brother is a morally poor person!”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed even more as he answered, “You are not an upright person yourself, why bother going through this charade of being good or bad?”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua taunting him back without any intention of relenting, the elder brother Fan’s embarrassment turned into anger and he motioned towards the few people behind him as he shouted, “Forget it, give this rascal a good lesson and let him know my prowess.”

When the people behind him heard this, three youths walked out and raised their fists menacingly and flexed their sturdy muscles, but Zhang Xiaohua did not seem to mind as he maintained his smiling expression.

Seeing that they were being made a fool of, the three youths exchanged glances and ran towards Zhang Xiaohua.

The three of them obviously had some experience in fighting and their movements were practiced, but they were immediately bullied over when they got near Zhang Xiaohua. Zhang Xiaohua used a move from the dipper heavenly fist martial art to block an oncoming punch before switching to another stance and kicking the same person’s lower body. With a “Pa” sound, the person fell onto the ground while another opponent had already taken his place. Zhang Xiaohua did not attempt to avoid his attack, he raised his fist to meet the other party’s punch and their fists collided, Zhang Xiaohua remained in his position

while the other party grabbed his own fist and cried out in pain. The last person already retracted his steps when he saw his other two members being defeated but how could Zhang Xiaohua let him go? With a step as fast as an arrow, Zhang Xiaohua lifted his leg and kicked towards the person's waist, and the person cried out as well as he fell onto the ground while Zhang Xiaohua felt strange as he did not use much force this time.

Seeing that the three had been defeated so easily, elder brother Fan was like a person who could not get off the tiger he was riding on. If he escaped without fighting, he would have difficulties assuming his command but if he continued to fight, the remaining people with him added might not be a match for this child, so what should he do?

Elder brother Fan pondered for a moment before taking out an object from his waist while the other four performed similar actions. At that moment, Zhang Xiaohua could see clearly that all his opponents had a dagger in their hands.

Seeing the daggers that shone in a chilling light, Zhang Xiaohua became anxious because even though he was confident in a fist-to-fist combat, he had no experience when his opponent was wielding a weapon.

However, everything has its first time and this was perhaps another kind of test for him. With such a mindset, Zhang Xiaohua unknowingly felt for the small sword in his chest but the moment he gripped it, he relaxed his grip. The small sword was too powerful and he could not control its lethality, there would definitely be bloodshed if he took it out and it might become troublesome if he caused a death on the streets. Hence, he decided not to use it.

When elder brother Fan saw Zhang Xiaohua's anxious expression, he felt gleeful and rushed forward with the dagger in his hands as he thrust it towards Zhang Xiaohua's waist. As for the remaining four youths, they followed their leader and waved their daggers towards Zhang Xiaohua.

When Zhang Xiaohua saw the flashing oncoming daggers that were heading towards the various parts of his body, he could not help but become fluster and displayed a defensive stance in the dipper heavenly fist martial art. After avoiding some of the attacks, he was still careless and got hurt by one of the daggers which scratched his arm, causing a bloody patch to form on his sleeves.

Zhang Xiaohua suddenly became composed after he got injured, he knew that there was not much effect if he continued to defend, and as the saying went, offence is the best defence.

Zhang Xiaohua adjusted his posture slightly and when he saw a weak spot among the daggers, his leg flew up and kicked towards the wrist. As a result, a cry was emitted from the person and the dagger flew into the air.

Chapter 137: Coincidental encounter

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Coincidental encounter

On seeing the effectiveness of his offensive strategy, Zhang Xiaohua's confidence got a huge boost as his steps became lighter and felt slightly pleased from his accomplishment.

When it came to Zhang Xiaohua's fighting experience, the rainy night could be countered as his maiden fight but unfortunately, the situation was urgent and there was no opportunity to exchange kicks and punches. Furthermore, towards the black clothed elder, his victory was amazingly determined with a single sword thrust so when counting Zhang Xiaohua's real fighting experience, it was actually close to zero.

Hence, his nerves became unsettled when the other party took out their daggers.

Now that he had successfully disarmed one of the opponents, Zhang Xiaohua seized the opportunity that he had turned the tides of the battle and began to display with martial arts earnestly. While fighting with the other four people, his footsteps meticulously demonstrated his own dipper heavenly fist's prowess and as the saying goes, actual experience is the best lesson. Zhang Xiaohua's spirit soared higher as he continued to fight, and his movements became better the more he fought. Those people were like fertilizers to Zhang Xiaohua, and the latter's experience continued to soar upwards like a Kongming lantern.

How could those town trolls have learnt any proper martial art before? Their attacks had no depths and instead, they became a good stepping stone for Zhang Xiaohua who was taking his beginner steps in fighting. However, they did not know that their chops and thrusts could not reach Zhang Xiaohua's clothes

anymore.

After fighting for some while, the leader, elder brother Fan, realized that the situation had taken a turn for the worst. He initially thought that this youth was from the village and would be able to obtain a good harvest just by giving him a scare, but how would he know that he would be ignored instead and his dignity would be trampled upon so easily? Instead, he gave up trying to coerce the boy but used force, but it was ineffective even after taking out their weapons, and the most frightening thing was that the boy became even more relaxed under the threat of their daggers. Such an outcome was far from what elder brother Fan could have predicted.

No matter what, elder brother Fan was the leader of the group so his observations were sharper than the rest. While the other youths were fighting passionately, he already stealthily retracted his attacks and distanced himself from the boy.

As for Zhang Xiaohua who had full control of the situation, he also noticed elder brother Fan's intention but how could he let the latter with such evil intentions leave so easily? Furthermore, the reason he fought with these people was to increase his own fighting experience and warm up his muscles. Zhang Xiaohua was already feeling slightly annoyed and when he saw the other party's unusual actions, he no longer extended the fight and with a fly of his body, his legs kicked the four men like they were hitting the air. His movement was just like a "the four killing corners" of the sixth fist martial art.

Zhang Xiaohua's kicks were also imbued with the tight amount of force and the four men did not get back up after they fell onto the ground, leaving only elder brother Fan as the last standing survivor.

At that moment, clapping sounds could be heard suddenly from behind followed by a voice that said, "Good move!"

Zhang Xiaohua tilted his head and looked, and it was the heroes who were chatting at the table beside him in the restaurant!

Zhang Xiaohua wrinkled his brows and was about to speak up when the wretched elder brother Fan knelt on the ground and flung his dagger aside, he kowtowed onto the floor like he was pounding garlic and said, "Have mercy little

master, have mercy on me little master. I have a mother who is in her eighties lying on the bed at home, as well as three youths who have yet to wean off milk. If you take my life today, they will not be able to live much longer, and you will claim three other lives along with mine.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised when he heard this, if what this person said was true, he would be at a loss of what to do. This man was so evil to rob him even with a weapon, and if he did not know any martial arts, wouldn't he be the one who would be bullied instead?

But if he let them off, Zhang Xiaohua could not help but think back to the encounter his family had in Lu town, wouldn't it be similar to that case? He felt disgruntled inside.

While Zhang Xiaohua was being torn on what to do, the few heroes who praised him walked over to his side.

The square-faced hero in the front cupped his fists and said, “This little brother, I, Yuan Changqing, greet you respectfully.”

Seeing the courteous behaviour of the other party, Zhang Xiaohua felt confused so he greeted back respectfully.

Yuan Changqing saw Zhang Xiaohua's frown and guessed his dilemma, he smiled and said, “Little brother do not have to worry, I am rash at sometimes but am not related to this person in anyway, so please be at ease.”

Upon hearing these words, Zhang Xiaohua felt even more puzzled, if this person was acquaintances with elder brother Fan and asked him to let the latter off, he would do so willingly. But since he did not know the man, what had he come over for?

Thus, Yuan Changqing explained the reason why he went over.

It appeared that when Zhang Xiaohua was asking the waiter for the more information, the Yuan Changqing also overheard their conversation and also noticed the unsightly gaze elder brother Fan gave him. If it was someone else, Yuan Changqing might not have bothered but because he heard the youth mentioned Pingyang city, and since he came from there as well, he decided not to stand aside and lend a helping hand instead.

After Zhang Xiaohua left the restaurant, the other few men who have eaten and drunk their fill also settled their own bills and under the suggestion of Yuan Changqing, they followed Zhang Xiaohua from afar.

These men had also seen with their own eyes elder brother Fan colliding onto Zhang Xiaohua deliberately and the youths surrounding Zhang Xiaohua, but Yuan Changqing did not hurry over and pull the other men aside when they saw Zhang Xiaohua's relaxed expression that contained no fear. They hid themselves up until they saw Zhang Xiaohua demonstrated the dipper heavenly fist and defeated his opponents, and could not help but call out their praises.

After listening to his explanation, Zhang Xiaohua then realized that there were still kind-hearted people in Jianghu, but his heart became puzzled on why they only helped him because he came from Pingyang city?

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua asked, "Elder brother Yuan, helping weak people on the road when they see them is what people from Jianghu should naturally do, so you should help me immediately after seeing that I was bullied by the town's folk. So why did you say that you were not planning to help initially?"

Yuan Changqing and the others flushed slightly and said in an embarrassed tone, "Little brother does not know this but we are not from this city like you. As the saying goes, a dragon does not press on snake in its own home, so we would want to avoid any unnecessary trouble if possible."

Zhang Xiaohua became enlightened and he asked again, "So why did you choose to help me?"

Yuan Changqing replied, "Haha, the reason is simple, because we are all from Pingyang city as well!"

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua became overjoyed and he said, "Really, that's great. I was wondering how I should get back, but since you are here, we can journey together instead. Haha, at the very least, you can tell me where I am and how do I get back to Pingyang city from here."

Yuan Changqing smiled and said, "That is for sure, as the saying goes, when people of the same hometown meet each other, their eyes become wet with tears, so how can we not help out? Oh right, I have not asked you yet but why did your last move looked so familiar? I seemed to have seen it somewhere

before but cannot recall what it is, can you tell me what move it was?”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered and replied apologetically, “The last move you mentioned should be a stance of the sixth fist martial arts but I cannot remember its name, and I also did not manage to learn it fully so the way I performed it might be different from others. You may recall it if you think slightly harder.”

Yuan Changqing became enlightened, he said in a touched voice, “Little brother is absolutely right, now that you say it, I think I recall that this move is called “the four killing corners”, but this sixth fist martial art is indeed difficult to pick up, I am still not familiar even after training in it for so long. It seems that only our head Zhang knows this fist martial art the best.”

Zhang Xiaohua also did not mind and he smiled in reply, “At least you are better than me, I will forget almost every martial art I learnt, so you are much luckier.”

Yuan Changqing said in a curious tone, “But little brother executed it quite well just now, and I could see that your fist stances were exceptional before that as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua waved his hands and said, “Those are something I put together somehow, it is just a random assortment of martial arts. If these opponents knew real martial arts, I am afraid I would have lost terribly much earlier on.”

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohua turned his gaze severely towards elder brother Fan and the rest who were on the ground.

When elder brother Fan saw that these group of people knew each other, he became even more frightened and could only kneel down more honestly. Zhang Xiaohua ignored him and asked Yuan Changqing what he should do.

Yuan Changqing pondered before smiling and said, “Little brother, you do not have to consider what he had said, they are most likely just lies to gain your sympathy. From his age, it is unlikely for him to have an eighty-year old mother, and while having three children is still possible, I believe that he had exaggerated or lied so you do not need to think too much. As for these people, they seemed to be involved mainly in small petty crimes and should not dare to do anything too harmful.”

Elder brother Fan who was listening from a side quickly pleaded, “That’s right, little master, please have mercy. We have only done petty things, how would we dare to do anything bad for real?”

Zhang Xiaohua retorted, “Then why did you take out your daggers? Isn’t it to hurt other people? Do you dare to claim that you have not hurt anyone before?”

Elder brother Fan defended himself more desperately, “Little master, please reconsider, aren’t I prostrating on the ground right now? I did not imagine that you could discover our plot which is why we had to act instead, and you can see from our abilities that we are incapable of doing any serious criminal activities. My hands are clean, and I have not taken any lives before.”

Zhang Xiaohua was still not fully convinced and he turned towards Yuan Changqing who nodded his head to show that the man’s words were believable and whispered to his ear, “Even if he has done anything seriously bad, we are outsiders in this town and would not be aware of the real situation. And seeing how he looks right now, it would be meaningless even if we send him to the authorities and they will let him off with a light punishment.”

Zhang Xiaohua considered the advice seriously and kicked elder brother Fan again before saying, “I will believe your words for today, but if I ever catch you doing anything wrong to other people again, hehe, then you will not be let off as lightly as right now.”

Upon listening to this, the elder brother Fan became overjoyed and said, “I understand, I understand completely. Many thanks to little master for sparing my life, I will bring the rest back and lead a good and proper life in the future, and we will do not such things anymore.”

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips when he heard this and thought secretly, “His explanation sounds even better than singings, who would be dumb enough to believe you.”

At that moment, the other youths also regained their consciousness and were helping each other get up, and when they heard Zhang Xiaohua’s pardon, they supported each other and prepared to leave with elder brother Fan.

However, before they could even lift a single step, Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes suddenly rolled and he called out loudly, “You all wait for a moment, I have

another matter.”

When elder brother Fan heard this, his face became as white as a sheet when he turned around and smiled obligingly, “Little master, what other matter is there?”

Zhang Xiaohua laughed “hehe” and said. “It will be too easy for you to go off so simply; I will have to give you some punishment at least. In order serve the other people in this town better, I will have to give you a lesson which you can remember so you will think twice before committing any crimes.”

The expression on elder brother Zhang’s face turned even uglier and he said, “Since young master has said so, I wonder what lesson you will be giving us?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Since you all tried to rob me and take my money pouch, I naturally have to return the favour. Furthermore, sigh..., your behaviour has greatly frightened my heart and spoiled my beautiful impression of this town, this loss is no small matter so you cannot leave without any proper compensation. I have decided...”

Zhang Xiaohua took a deep breath and continued, “I have decided to confiscate all your money pouches so you all know how it feels to be robbed by someone else!”

Everyone almost fainted when they heard him, why bother giving so many reasons if he just wanted compensation.

The elder brother Fan naturally did not dare to voice his displeasure and he quickly instructed his subordinates to take out their measly money pouches and passed it over to Zhang Xiaohua, while Zhang Xiaohua accepted them happily and kept them into his breast.

Finally, the elder brother Fan also took out his money pouch which was slightly more filled than the rest. Zhang Xiaohua weighed it in his hands and said, “It is not that heavy either, it seems that business is not so good these days.”

The elder brother Fan smiled helplessly and said, “Little master likes to joke so much, we do not do these often so we are naturally not wealthy.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled gleefully and said, “Is there nothing else in your breast?”

The elder brother Fan smiled and said, "There is really nothing." After finishing his sentence, he used a hand and searched around his breast to display his sincerity.

However, his hand suddenly froze and he took out a pale green jade the size of a palm and offered it to Zhang Xiaohua's hands, saying, "About this, I forgot about this little toy earlier!"

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, "Where did this come from? Why did you forget about it?"

The elder brother Fan replied apologetically, "I pickpocket this from a wealthy merchant yesterday and had already gone to the jade shop to check its value but it is not worth much, hehe, which is why I put it casually into my chest. If young master does not mind such a lousy item, please take it to appease your anger."

Zhang Xiaohua did not stand on ceremony and extended his hands to receive the piece of jade, saying, "If it helps to make the town a better place, I will accept it reluctantly to give you a good lesson."

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua magnanimously stripped the six to seven men off their valuables like this before letting them go.

Yuan Changqing and the others stared dumbfounded at Zhang Xiaohua's actions not knowing whether they should complement the latter or not. He had used logic and reasoning to defend his actions, since the other party wanted to rob me, I should give you a lesson, but since you are all injured so severely, I will not hurt you anymore and take your money pouches instead. Alright, I hope you remember this lesson with this punishment!

Zhang Xiaohua felt satisfied as he kept all the money pouches and the jade piece into his breast, his eyes smiled into a crescent as he said, "Fellow, why the shocked expressions? Where do you stay? Shall we head to Feichi carriage station together?"

Yuan Changqing and the others awoke from their daze and said, "It's fine, we have our own accommodation, little brother can follow us instead."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "Then I shall not stand on ceremony."

After finishing his sentence, he followed Yuan Changqing and the others as

they walked on the snowy road.

Everyone was quiet while they were walking as though they had not recovered from the shock of the earlier events, but Zhang Xiaohua did not mind the stillness and he asked, “Elder brother Yuan, after talking so much, you have not mentioned where you guys are from.”

Yuan Changqing replied, “We are delivery hands from Pingyang city’s Lotus escort, and we went out for a job before the beginning of the year to this remote town. We should be returning back in a few days later.”

“Lotus escort? Delivery hand?” Zhang Xiaohua’s excitement went up by three levels causing everyone to be shocked.

Afterwards, Zhang Xiaohua pulled Yuan Changqing’s hands and asked, “In that case, elder brother Yuan, do you know someone called Zhang Xiaohu?”

“Zhang Xiaohu?” Yuan Changqing and the others were surprised, they replied in unison, “Of course we do, he is our head!”

Zhang Xiaohua became enlightened, no wonder they said that they were familiar with the sixth fist, was it not Zhang Xiaohu’s specialty fist martial art?

Yuan Changqing asked, “Little brother, do you know our head?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, “Not only do I know him, I have known him for thirteen years.”

Yuan Changqing asked in surprise, “Why so?”

Zhang Xiaohua answered, “Because I am his younger brother and am thirteen years old this year. Don’t you agree with my answer?”

Yuan Changqing understood the situation and said, “Oh, I know this. I have heard that head Zhang has a younger brother with enormous strength, but what was his name again?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Zhang Xiaohua! You have to remember such a handsome and cool name.”

Yuan Changqing smiled as he said, “That’s right, you are Zhang Xiaohua. I heard that you even lifted a five hundred stone weight last year when you followed head Zhang to the escort station for his recruitment test.

Unfortunately, I was not there to see it personally or I would definitely have recognized you. I hope little brother is not offended.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Not offended, I am not offended at all. Look at me, don’t I look like my second elder brother?”

Yuan Changqing studied carefully and replied, “Mm, there are some similarities, but you are still small and skinny whereas head Zhang’s face is fleshier. However, your eyebrows are still similar, although it is hard to tell if I looked at you two separately.”

Since the other party was Zhang Xiaohu’s subordinate, he was naturally not an outsider, Zhang Xiaohua had also stayed in the escort station for a long period to nurse his injuries so he had already considered the escort station as his own home. Thus, he was more affectionate towards Yuan Changqing and the rest and had thrown all his wariness to the wind.

Indeed, not long after, the few men walked to a small alley in the east of the little town and entered a small courtyard that was half closed from the alley. Yuan Changqing opened the door and shouted, “Head Zhang, is head Zhang around?”

Even before hearing Zhang Xiaohu’s reply, another shrill voice sounded out, “Why are you shouting so loudly? So unruly, where did your usual training go to? Your head Zhang is not around, he went out to settle some matters so you can report the matter to me instead.”

Zhang Xiaohua followed Yuan Changqing and the rest into a courtyard that was neither large nor small and the owner of the shrill voice walked out of the main hall room. He was a bald man with a face full of lines, and when Yuan Changqing and the rest saw him they hurriedly greeted, “Station head Luo, you are here.”

Station head Luo walked towards them, snorted and wrinkled his brows before saying, “You all went out to drink again?”

Yuan Changqing smiled and said, “Station leader, we brothers were bored after staying in this desolated run-down place for such a long time, which is why we went out to drink a little.”

Station head Luo said, “Drinking is fine, but don’t you dare cause any trouble when you get drunk.”

He then saw Zhang Xiaohua and asked in an annoyed tone, “Who is this person? Why have you brought a stranger in?”

Chapter 138: Old acquaintances

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Old acquaintances

When Yuan Changqing saw station head Luo's expression turned ugly, he hurriedly stepped forward to explain the situation, "Please do not misunderstand, station head. This little brother here is our head Zhang's own little brother; he is called Zhang Xiaohua. We happened to meet him coincidentally which is why we brought him back instead to let the two brothers reunite. Think about it, even if he was not head Zhang's younger brother, his age is still so young and since he is also from Pingyang city, shouldn't we take care of him and not let him run about blindly in this place?"

Station head Luo's expression tuned slightly better and he asked, "Do you all know him? How can you confirm if he is Zhang Xiaohu's little brother or not?"

Yuan Changqing smiled obligingly and said, "Station head likes to joke too much, how can we recognize him? However, can't you tell that he and our head Zhang comes from the same mould? What else is there to be suspicious of?"

Station head Luo studied Zhang Xiaohua suspiciously for half a bell of time before slapping his bald head and saying, "Zhang Xiaohua right, I seemed to have seen you somewhere before?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "It is like this, station head Luo, I got injured earlier last year and was nursing my injuries in the escort station for a period of time. Perhaps we have met during then."

Station head Luo pondered for a while before smiling and said, "Perhaps so, there were more duties in the escort station last year and I was out most of the time and seldom in the station, so we might have met only once or twice."

Station head Luo said to Yuan Changqing, "Zhang Xiaohu went out to settle

some matters and will probably return by nightfall, you all can bring this child to his room for the time being.”

After finishing his sentence, he walked out through the door.

After station head Luo was faraway, Yuan Changqing retracted his smiling face and whispered, “Don’t bother about him, Zhang Xiaohua, this person often look down on us delivery hands because of his position as the station head and would often nitpick at every little action of ours. Because of this, our head Zhang, oh, who is your second brother, would often get into an argument with him. If not, why would he be trying to find faults on you?”

Zhang Xiaohua did not mind, he had charged into an unfamiliar territory unannounced so the other party had grounded reasons to interrogate him. Otherwise, how would he deserve to be a security head?

Yuan Changqing saw Zhang Xiaohua’s smiling but silent countenance so he said, “Come, I’ll bring you to head Zhang’s room. From your being, you must be tired out and should take a rest first. We can discuss anything else later at night after your second brother returns.”

After finishing his sentence, the few people took Zhang Xiaohua to a small and simple room. The door was unlatched and everyone just walked in after opening the door, the room was also empty. Yuan Changqing smiled as he explained, “This courtyard was rented when we came here before the New Year, and is very simply furnished. Since we were going to leave soon after, we did not refurbish it much.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “This room is not much different from my second brother’s room in the escort station.”

Yuan Changqing said, “Head Zhang’s room is still pretty good and he occupies it by himself. Head Zhang’er also likes cleanliness so the room is definitely tidy. The rest of us are living beside here and our rooms cannot be described simply with the word “dirty”. Alright, Zhang Xiaohua, you can take a rest first and when head Zhang’er returns, we can give him a large surprise later.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s heart stirred and he said, “Alright, that it is settled, no one should inform him of me before then.”

Yuan Changqing and the rest laughed, "Alright, we promise. Head Zhang'er treats us very well but we have not seen him happy for a while, he is bound to be thrilled this time round."

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, "That station head Luo also knows of me, won't he tell my second brother too?"

Yuan Changqing and the others replied, "Haha, don't worry. If station head Luo went out at this time, he is mostly like going to a certain place to have fun. With your second brother around, many matters will be settled well so the station head will have a piece of mind and won't be back until late at night."

Zhang Xiaohua calmed down and expressed his approval of the plan.

When Yuan Changqing and the rest saw Zhang Xiaohua's expression which was slightly tired, they did not stay in the room much further and bid their farewells.

Zhang Xiaohua had run since morning to reach the town, ate a meal in the restaurant before meeting with another event and had to display his prowess and execute the "four killing corners", so he was naturally feeling fatigued. He looked at the wound on his arm which had stopped bleeding a while ago and was currently not hurting before turning his attention to Zhang Xiaohu's bed. He unrolled the sheets and drilled through them before closing his eyes and falling asleep soon after.

Time passed quickly and the days in winter were also shorter, and soon, it was evening.

When it was time to light the lamps, Zhang Xiaohu returned from outside, carrying fatigue all over his body but with some hint of happiness. Even though he was only a deputy for station head Luo and was supposed to assist the latter with small tasks, this senior brother seemed to view his potential highly and would push many responsibilities over to him. For example, the matter of discussing the return route was assigned to him, it was simply treating him as free labour. However, this was good as well since he got the opportunity to learn many things and would be more prepared if he had to make a solo trip in the future. However, Zhang Xiaohu laughed as he shook his head, he was only a lowly delivery hand and not some station head so how would the escort station assign him to a job by himself?

Fortunately, he had finalized the time and route for their return trip that day, so the days in Pingyang city would be one step closer to him. Upon thinking of Pingyang city, Zhang Xiaohu still felt as though there were arrows shot through his heart. He had run two long jobs so far in the previous year and even spend the New Year outside of the city, so he could not help but wonder how his little brother was doing in Huanxi mountain villa right then. Nevertheless, as he recalled what Zhang Xiaohua told him, there were many people who were watching after the latter so his New Year must have been quite enjoyable. There was also gentleman Li Jinfeng who promised to deliver a message and some money back to their home before the New Year, Zhang Xiaohu had been too busy with jobs and had no time to visit the former. Li Jinfeng must be enjoying his time back home so Zhang Xiaohu could not help but wonder if the former remembered to drop by Guo village.

When Zhang Xiaohu entered the courtyard and greeted the people inside, he took quick paces as he walked to his room, yanked open the door, walked to the tableside in his room and took out a fire starter from his breast to light the oil lamp before pouring a cup of water for himself. He sat on the small stool beside the table as he drank the water and sighed out in relief.

After the cup was emptied, Zhang Xiaohu realized that there was another person in the room lying in his bed. He shook his head and thought, "Which other brother from the escort station got drunk again and went into the wrong room?"

Hence, Zhang Xiaohu stood up, picked up the oil lamp and walked to the front of the bed. The person was sleeping soundly with his back facing the front so Zhang Xiaohu flipped him over poor-naturedly and scolded in a laughing tone, "Why aren't you awake yet, the sky has already darkened. Go eat your meal and you can return to your own room later if you still feel like sleeping."

The person he flipped over had a small and light body so Zhang Xiaohu flipped him over easily. As Zhang Xiaohu was pondering who the person was, when his eyes met the person's face, he involuntarily yelped out, "Xiaohua!"

The lantern in his hands almost dropped onto Zhang Xiaohua's face.

Zhang Xiaohu jumped in fright and hurriedly tried to recompose himself, he

gripped onto the lantern tightly to prevent it from disfiguring his little brother's face before taking another closer look. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief, who was this person in front of him if he was not his little brother Zhang Xiaohua?

Was he dreaming right then?

Zhang Xiaohu walked to the door and saw the few bodyguards and delivery hands walking about the courtyard. The snow in the courtyard was still quite deep, was it not his courtyard? Zhang Xiaohua pinched his cheek while still feeling overwhelmed and the resultant pain told him that he was not dreaming at all!

However, how did Zhang Xiaohua ran over to his bed all the way from Pingyang city?

While holding to this thought, Zhang Xiaohu walked quickly back to the bed and was about to wake Zhang Xiaohua up to question him but stopped when he saw Zhang Xiaohua's peaceful sleeping expression. He thought that the boy must be tired so he retracted his hands and decided to let Xiaohua have a good rest first. No matter what had happened, even if the sky was to dropped down, since his little brother had returned to his side, he should do his part as an elder brother and protect the boy under his wings. His little brother was still young so he must have suffered much by travelling all the way to here, and even if the situation was complex, now was not the time for him to interrogate the boy, and everything can be slowly resolved later when he woke up.

When he thought up to here, Zhang Xiaohu carefully extinguished the oil lamp light and placed it down, he took light steps and cautiously walked out of the room before closing the door softly in fear of making a single sound and waking Zhang Xiaohua from his good dream.

When he walked into the courtyard, Zhang Xiaohu stopped a delivery hand and asked, "Is station head Luo around?"

The person smiled as he replied, "Head Zhang'er, don't you know that station head Luo would seldom have his dinner back here? He must still be outside right now."

Zhang Xiaohu mock scolded the man, "I am naturally aware of this, I am asking if you have seen him in the day."

The person replied, "Not since afternoon."

Zhang Xiaohu asked again, "In that case, did you see if anyone entered my room?"

The person pondered for a while before saying, "I do not have any impression, our courtyard is so rustic and there are usually no visitors so if there was someone who came, I would definitely have an impression of him. What is the matter, head Zhang'er, did you lose something?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "Where have I lost anything, its fine. I am only asking."

After finishing his sentence, he allowed the person to walk off.

Following this, he went to ask more people from the station but had the same answer in return. Zhang Xiaohu felt puzzled, did his younger brother fly into his room? Furthermore, how did he know where his room was?

While he was preoccupied with his thoughts, Yuan Changqing and a few other delivery hands whom he was close with walked from the opposite direction. Yuan Changqing smiled when he saw Zhang Xiaohu and asked, "Head Zhang'er, have you just returned from outside?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled as he replied, "That's right, I just came back. Why did you guys go out again?"

Yuan Changqing said, "It is boring to stay in the courtyard, what can we do if we don't go out?"

Zhang Xiaohu replied, "Instead of strolling outside, why not practice your fist martial arts more? Train your body and spend your time practicing your martial arts."

Yuan Changqing smiled and said, "Head Zhang'er, we can't be compared to you. Our fist martial arts will always be the same standard no matter how much we practice; how can we improve any further? If we had your ability to sense qi and the opportunity to learn an inner energy cultivation method, we would also spend more time and effort in our martial arts practice."

Zhang Xiaohu replied, "As the saying goes, opportunities will come to those

who are ready. With this kind of mentality, you won't be able to grab onto the opportunity even if it is hanging right in front of you."

Yuan Changqing said, "Alright, head Zhang'er, I know you mean well for us. We will definitely practice harder after dinner so save your saliva and nagging."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "You don't have to watch myself, whether or not to practice martial art is your own decision to make."

Yuan Changqing's expression then turned mysterious as he asked, "Head Zhang'er, did you just return? You have not entered your room yet right?"

Zhang Xiaohu was slightly confused as he answered, "I came back a while ago and already stepped into my room earlier."

He suddenly became enlightened and asked, "Were you the ones who brought Zhang Xiaohua back?"

Yuan Changqing blinked smilingly as he replied, "That's right, I did that."

Zhang Xiaohu laughed for a while before saying, "Good brother, I have not treated you well all these while for nothing. I have to thank you properly this time round."

Yuan Changqing hurriedly shrugged it off, he said, "Head Zhang'er is too kind, you treat us so well usually and even though you are pretty young yourself, all of us respect you highly. To do something for you is our joy so you don't have to be courteous about it. Furthermore, we only had a fortunate encounter and didn't do much at all."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "No matter what, Zhang Xiaohu is only a ten plus year old child. If you few did not bring him here, he would never find his way to me. Oh right, how did you meet him? Do you recognize Xiaohua?"

When he asked up to here, Yuan Changqing and the rest had animated expressions as Yuan Changqing replied, "Head Zhang'er-ah, as the saying goes, a tiger father cannot have a cowardly dog as a son, but in your case, it should be a dragon brother can only have at least a tiger as a younger brother!"

Zhang Xiaohu became stunned and he mock scolded, "What rubbish, my eldest brother is called Xiaolong (dragon), while I am Xiaohu (tiger), so we are naturally

dragon and tiger brothers.”

Yuan Changqing saw that the other party had misunderstood him so he laughed and explained himself, “I am referring to your younger brother, he is truly what is considered to be amazing.”

Zhang Xiaohu was confused so Yuan Changqing recounted the events that happened earlier in the day to him.

Just recounting the events took up half of an hour and one could not deny that Yuan Changqing was gifted in the tongue. It was truly the world’s loss if he did not choose to be a scholar as his occupation.

The people beside also gave a thumbs up and praised Zhang Xiaohu’s gifted younger brother as they listened to the recount, while Zhang Xiaohu was only feeling worried and foreboding any mishap given that he knew of his younger brother’s injury in his right arm. Only after Yuan Changqing finished his story did he say, “You guys wait here, I’ll go back to take a look.”

Everyone was confused as they watched Zhang Xiaohu rushed back into his room.

Not long after, he returned with a straight expression on his face again.

Yuan Changqing asked, “Head Zhang’er, did you forget something important?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled as he replied, “I did not forget anything but was just worried for Xiaohua’s injuries. I won’t feel relieved if I do not see it personally with my own eyes.”

Everyone then understood they while they were concerned with the outcome of the fight, only his own brother was thinking of his injury and would only be relieved if the boy was alright.

Yuan Changqing replied in a slightly guilty tone, “Head Zhang’er, it is old brother’s fault this time. I was only concerned about bringing Zhang Xiaohua back and forgot about his injury, I wonder how his arm is right now.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled as said, “It is alright, there was only a minor scrape. I have only taken a brief look and the light from the oil lamp is not clear enough, but it seemed to be a superficial wound and a scab had already formed. Xiaohua has a

strong body so he would be jumping and running as usual when he wakes up.”

Yuan Changqing replied in a serious tone, “It will be good if Xiaohua is fine. If not, we brothers will definitely seek justice for him.”

Zhang Xiaohu’s expression also turned dark as he said, “My younger brother cannot get injured for nothing. Even though he had pardoned the other party in the afternoon, it has become a different matter if he was injured. I will go out tomorrow and let them bleed in return!”

When he spoke up to here, Yuan Changqing’s expression turned strange. In order to protect Zhang Xiaohua’s heroic behaviour earlier, he had exaggerated some bits and left out other parts, but since Zhang Xiaohu had made such a serious declaration, Yuan Changqing could not hide any further. He looked at the surrounding people before pulling Zhang Xiaohu away to a private corner and whispered in his ear. Zhang Xiaohu’s expression turned ecstatic as he listened, and after the Yuan Changqing finished his explanation, Zhang Xiaohu’s mouth smiled so wide that it almost split apart, he could not help but asked in disbelief, “Did he really do that? Did you see it with your own eyes?”

Yuan Changqing smiled as he said, “I won’t be able to hide anything from you for long, why don’t you ask him yourself tomorrow, or go back and take a look to find out?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Since that is the case, there will be no need to look for them to settle any debts, hahaha.”

After finishing his sentence, he said, “Dear brothers, in a while, all of you will follow me to get drunk.”

Since he heard that his younger brother was fine, Zhang Xiaohu was so happy that he wanted to drink in celebration.

Everyone was even more surprised when they saw Zhang Xiaohu who was still fuming not long ago suddenly proposing to celebrate in happiness, they all surrounded Yuan Changqing and inquired for an explanation, what did the person told Zhang Xiaohu? However, the person refused to open his mouth and told them to look for Zhang Xiaohu, so everyone became vexed from their curiosity instead.

Up until the night on the table which was filled with wine, everyone took the opportunity while Zhang Xiaohu was drunk to satisfy their curiosity again. Zhang Xiaohu then revealed the truth and everyone who heard it also broke into laughter as they praised, “Zhang Xiaohua, he is so much fun!”

Everyone then drifted off into a blank state of unawareness.

Even though he ordered everyone to get drunk, how could Zhang Xiaohu drink so much while knowing that his young brother was lying on his own bed with injuries in his body? When everyone finally blanked out from their drunkenness, only Zhang Xiaohu returned back to the courtyard while still sober.

During the night, Zhang Xiaohu sat beside Zhang Xiaohua and slept, he did not get too close to the latter in fear of waking him up but was still filled with concern for the boy, so he forgot that after Zhang Xiaohua has fallen asleep, how could a simple prod cause him to wake up?

In the morning of the next day after Zhang Xiaohua woke up from his dream which was filled with the usual flashing lights, the first thing he saw was the second brother whom he yearned for and was about to shout in joy when he heard Zhang Xiaohu’s faint snoring. He quickly covered his mouth with his hands but unfortunately, his small actions already stirred Zhang Xiaohu awake.

When Zhang Xiaohu opened his eyes, he saw Zhang Xiaohua’s expression which was filled with joy looking at himself and immediately jumped up and laughed, “Xiaohua, you’re awake!”

Zhang Xiaohua also laughed as he said, “That’s right, second brother, I woke up.”

Even though they did not exchange many sentences, both brothers were feeling very happy at the moment.

Zhang Xiaohu then asked, “Did you sleep enough, why not sleep for a little longer, it is still quite early.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, “Second brother, it is hard for me to fall back to sleep after I wake up. Furthermore, I have been sleeping on your bed since yesterday afternoon, so surely I won’t be tired after sleeping for such a long time.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Alright, then let me inspect your wound now."

Zhang Xiaohua extended his hand as instructed while Zhang Xiaohu borrowed the light from the window and studied it over once before using a towel to wipe off some of the coagulated blood. Like he imagined, a scab had already formed and the wound looked like it had healed for over a few days.

Zhang Xiaohu's heart was only fully settled down after then.

Chapter 139: Harvest

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Harvest

At that moment, Zhang Xiaohu wrinkled his brows and glared at Zhang Xiaohua, he asked, "Xiaohua, why did you not stay in Huanxi mountain villa obediently and come all the way to this little remote town? This place is not even ordinarily far from Pingyang city, did you come alone? Or did someone else bring you along? Did you commit a serious fault in the mountain villa and thus escaped all the way over to here? If that is the case, Xiaohua, you don't have to be afraid and tell second brother everything that happened. Even if the sky was to fall, second brother will support it with his hands for you, but you must tell me the truth honestly."

When Zhang Xiaohua heard his second brother asked so many questions and became more ridiculous as he speculated, he quickly waved his hands and said, "Don't, second brother, even if the sky was to fall, it will still be taller than you so you don't have to worry about me. If you ask so many questions at once, how do you expect me to answer them? You should pour me some water; I am feeling quite thirsty right now. I will explain everything to you after I quench my thirst."

Zhang Xiaohu had no other choice but to turn around and pour him a cup of water. He watched Zhang Xiaohua as the latter gulped down the water before asking again, "You can explain the situation now right?"

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua was not unwilling to share the truth about Ou Yan and the rest with Zhang Xiaohu. However, he was always conscious of He Tianshu's reminder to keep the trip a secret, and the events of the attack during the rainy night almost caused him to lose his life, so he was afraid that his second brother would worry unnecessarily if he told the latter the truth. Furthermore, master Jing Xuan also seemed reluctant to let her traces be known to others, and she

did not even share her origins with Zhang Xiaohua, so how could Zhang Xiaohua not spare some consideration for her circumstances?

Nevertheless, Zhang Xiaohu was Zhang Xiaohua's own brother, so if he could not even trust him, then who else can he trust in this world? After pondering for a long while, Zhang Xiaohua finally opened his mouth and said, "Second brother, there are certain things that I have to keep secret so you must never ever tell anyone I am going to tell you today. Even if your station head Luo asks about it, you must not mention it to him."

When Zhang Xiaohu first saw Zhang Xiaohua's worried expression, he assumed that the latter had committed a grievous fault, but when he listened to Zhang Xiaohua's warning, his face turned serious and he nodded in agreement, "Alright, Xiaohua, I promise that I will not tell anyone whatever you are going to say."

Thus, Zhang Xiaohua recounted all the events since he left Huanxi mountain villa with the carriage party all the way up to the attack on the rainy night, but he did not mention anything about the fight between him and the black clothed elder. Instead, he said that he fell into the river accidentally while running away from the black clothed people, grabbed onto a piece of driftwood, and thus managed to survive and float down the river.

Zhang Xiaohu and Zhang Xiaohua had grown up together, so Zhang Xiaohu was naturally well aware of Zhang Xiaohua's abilities in swimming. While the latter is able to play pretend as a frog in the village river, being a loach in a river during a storm was far from impossible to him. Thus Zhang Xiaohu did not suspect Zhang Xiaohua's explanation of grabbing onto the driftwood, but his face still turned pale white when he heard Zhang Xiaohua float down the river for a long time until he was fished out at a slower running stream.

Seeing his second brother's frightened expression, Zhang Xiaohua felt puzzled so he asked, "What's wrong, second brother, aren't I doing well now? What is there to be afraid of?"

Zhang Xiaohu forced a smile and said, "As the saying goes, ignorance is bliss. Zhang Xiaohua, did you know that we are not far from sea over here, and that the river of our left would join up to the sea not far away? If you were not fished

up from the river, you would have floated all the way to that wide river which is even harder to go up ashore from, and when the river brings you to the sea, you might never have a chance to go back on land again. The sea is so vast and with only a piece of driftwood to keep you afloat, I am afraid you would have lost your life long ago. Tell me, how can I not be frightened?”

Zhang Xiaohua felt a shiver down his spine when he heard this, he secretly thanked little Meng’s fishing rod for which if not, he might be sleeping at the boundless sea right now!

Zhang Xiaohua continued to explain how he had fallen sick after being fished out of the river, and only until yesterday did his saviour brought him out and placed him in this unfamiliar town.

Zhang Xiaohu naturally felt indescribable heartache when he heard his younger brother barely escaped death so why would he bother about the minor questionable details, he gripped onto his younger brother’s hands tightly and while hoping that he could take his brother’s place in facing all these dangers and pains.

Zhang Xiaohua was even more assured of his decision when he saw Zhang Xiaohu’s reaction, if the latter had known that he was almost killed by someone else, wouldn’t his tears be falling all the way to the ground right then?

After half a bell of time, Zhang Xiaohu spoke up, “Since you floated all the way to here and villa master Ou’s life or death is still uncertain, then we naturally cannot mention any of this matters to anyone else, so you can just say that you were arranged to come here by a supervisor in Huanxi mountain villa instead.”

However, he laughed almost immediately and said, “However, who would dispatch a child like you to such a faraway place? It is more believable if you said that you followed someone else over but got separated when you reached this town. Now that you met us coincidentally, you can follow us back to Pingyang city and whatever that happens after we return can be decided later on.”

Zhang Xiaohua blinked and smiled, he said, “Then I shall follow second brother’s suggestion. Luckily, elder brother Yuan saw that I was tired yesterday and did not ask me too many questions, if not, I would be at a loss of what to say.”

When he spoke up to here, Zhang Xiaohu seemed to recall something and smiled gleefully, he teased, “I heard that someone’s actions were awe-inspiring yesterday, and he seemed to have gotten quite a good harvest.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s face immediately flushed when he heard this, he muttered softly, “That was because I did not want to let them off too easily.”

He then shook Zhang Xiaohu’s wrist and said, “Second brother, I won’t dare to do it in the future, okay?”

Zhang Xiaohu’s face straightened and he asked in a curious tone, “Why not? Not only must you do this, you should give them a good beating as well. As to these type of bullies, I can’t wait to punish them myself so why would I blame you?”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at Zhang Xiaohu with a shocked expression, he stopped shaking the latter’s wrist and asked in disbelief, “You approve of my actions?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled cheerfully as he replied, “That’s right, second brother approves of it wholeheartedly.”

Zhang Xiaohua became thrilled when he heard this, he said, “That is my good second brother. Oh right, I have not looked at the harvest from yesterday, so now would be a good time to do so.”

After finishing his sentence, he pulled out a large dump of money pouches from his breast that were of different sizes and various styles.

He then casually took one out that seemed rather full and opened it, while Zhang Xiaohu picked up another and opened to study its contents as well.

The money pouch that Zhang Xiaohua opened contained a few broken silvers and some copper coins, and while he was counting them, he heard Zhang Xiaohu exclaimed, “Wow, there are many things in this money pouch, there is even a hair pin. Oh, why is there a rock in here as well?”

Zhang Xiaohua raised his head to look and saw his second brother studying the contents of his own money pouch with interest, Zhang Xiaohua quickly snatched it away and said, “I did not get this from yesterday, I picked it up in the mountains a few days ago.”

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised but he did not suspect his words, he smiled and said, “Xiaohua, it seems that lady luck is shining on you. How could there be so much money on a money pouch which you picked up randomly.”

Zhang Xiaohua was too lazy to explain the details so he threw another money pouch from the table over and said, “Hurry and look at the rest.”

Zhang Xiaohu caught the money pouch and said, “Why bother doing it like this so slowly, let’s pour all of their contents on the table instead.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Second brother’s idea is good.”

Hence, the two brothers picked up the money pouches and poured all their contents one by one onto the tabletop.

Even though there were seven to eight money pouches on the table, there were not much things inside them and apart from elder brother Fan’s money pouch which was more filled than the rest, the others only contained a few copper coins. Zhang Xiaohua thought as he looked at the items, “Their money pouches are so empty, no wonder they wanted to rob me.”

However, as the saying goes, many small things go a long way so even though each money pouch had little money in them, there was seven to eight of them and their total contents added up to almost five pieces of silver and dozens of copper coins so Zhang Xiaohu still felt rather impressed.

After tidying and counting them, Zhang Xiaohu pushed the silvers and copper coins towards Zhang Xiaohua and said, “These are your harvests, so keep them well.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled but he only kept the copper coins and pushed the rest back to his second brother, he said, “Second brother, I will keep the copper coins as pocket change but you can keep these silvers for me and send it to our parents when you have the opportunity to.”

Zhang Xiaohu did not stand on the ceremony when he heard this, he picked out a money pouch that was decent looking from the dump and filled it with the silvers before placing it securely in his chest, he said, “Alright, then I will not be courteous. At least, I have a money pouch now which is no worse than the one you picked from the mountains.”

Zhang Xiaohua did not reply but took out the jade piece from his breast and said, “This is also for you, the person said that it was a counterfeit yesterday so you can go to the pawnshop when you are free to exchange it for some silvers.”

Zhang Xiaohu received it and studied it carefully before returning it back to Zhang Xiaohua, he said, “Forget it, there are many silvers here already and since it is a counterfeit, it should not be worth much. You can carry it and treat it as a toy instead.”

Zhang Xiaohua put it back into his breast as he was told.

Following this, he took out the small sword from his breast and passed it to Zhang Xiaohu.

Zhang Xiaohu saw Zhang Xiaohua continuously taking out items from his breast so he could not help but teased, “Is your breast a hundred treasures treasure chest? Why are there so many good stuff coming from it?”

Zhang Xiaohua only smiled and then explained the events of He Tianshu in the blacksmith store to Zhang Xiaohu. Zhang Xiaohua laughed secretly when he heard it, when he was in Pingyang city and had never gone out for a job, he always assumed that the prices of weapons were the same everywhere but after travelling out for a few times, he realized that weapon prices differed everywhere, so even though those seven silvers might not count for much to He Tianshu, it would still be a large amount to the blacksmith, so no wonder the other party gave a free gift along with it.

Zhang Xiaohu could tell that his little brother liked the small sword a lot so he took it and glanced all over, but he found nothing special apart from its weight, not to mention any hint of connectivity of comfort so he smiled and said, “It seems that this small sword is fated to belong to you, I can’t find anything out of the ordinary on it. However, it should still be something good for it to be given free after spending seven silvers in a blacksmith store.”

Even though Zhang Xiaohu said these words, he did not believe them. He felt that his little brother did not have many toys while growing up, so the latter naturally became attached when he got a new one so easily.

Zhang Xiaohua’s excitement diminished slightly as well when he saw his second brother’s disinterest, but he naturally could not tell the latter about how he used

the small sword to kill the black clothed elder, so he kept back the small sword into his breast again.

At that moment, the sky had already brightened considerably so Zhang Xiaohu said, "Let's go, Xiaohua, we shall have some breakfast first. I will still need to work later on so you can stay in the courtyard and play in here. The date for our return has already been fixed so you can follow us back then, so don't worry about anything else and play to your heart's content."

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips and thought secretly, "Still treating me as a kid!"

Zhang Xiaohu led Zhang Xiaohua out of the door and they met station head Luo outside, station head Luo's eyes were swollen as though he just woke up from a drunken stupor and when he saw Zhang Xiaohu's nonchalant attitude, he called out to the latter and asked, "Zhang Xiaohu, how was the matter yesterday?"

Zhang Xiaohu replied respectfully, "Station head Luo, everything was settled properly and I will give you a report of it later after breakfast. Please be settled."

Station head Luo nodded in approval and said, "Good, well done. Go have your breakfast first and find me later. Oh right, this little brother is really your younger brother?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "That's right, he is my little brother Zhang Xiaohua. It was indeed a coincidence to meet him here, I will tell you about it in detail later."

Station head Luo waved his hands and motioned the two brothers away to have their breakfast while he yawned and headed off to another direction.

Zhang Xiaohua carefully tugged Zhang Xiaohu and asked, "Second brother, why does this station head Luo not have the bearings of a station leader, are all station leaders in Lotus escort like this?"

Zhang Xiaohu looked around at his surroundings before saying in a soft tone, "Xiaohua, some things should be left unsaid especially if there are people around. While other station leaders in the escort station are not like this, perhaps station head Luo have been out of the city for too long and grew homesick, which is why he is like this now."

Zhang Xiaohua followed Zhang Xiaohu and had their breakfast at the small kitchen in the courtyard. At that moment, the station's cook and many of the delivery hands already knew that their head Zhang'er had met his own younger brother coincidentally in town, and Zhang Xiaohua's outstanding performance in town the day before had already been blabbered by Yuan Changqing to the rest. Hence, many of these people had good feelings towards Zhang Xiaohua, and no matter what, they could all be considered fellow brothers from Pingyang city so since he was able to punch out the teeth from an earthen snake, they all felt satisfied as though they were the ones who upheld justice personally.

Zhang Xiaohua was also feeling intimate towards these people after not seeing any familiar faces for a long time, he obediently talked to everyone and even before he finished his meal, everyone already developed a good impression towards him as though he was their own younger brother.

Zhang Xiaohu had many work to do in the team so he did not have much time to look after Zhang Xiaohua, he was initially worried that the latter would not adapt to the surroundings but upon seeing everyone treating Zhang Xiaohua with much love, his worries eased so he hurriedly finished his meal and gave Zhang Xiaohua a few instructions before rushing over to station head Luo's room.

Station head Luo's room was significantly larger than Zhang Xiaohu's one, and it was the only house with two rooms inside. At that moment, station head Luo was sitting inside the main room with a bowl of congee in front of him, and he was massaging his temples obviously still trying to recover from his hangover.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohu entered, station head Luo pointed to the stool in front of him and ordered, "Sit."

He then picked up the congee bowl and took two mouthfuls of congee before calling someone to bring it out.

Station head Luo then took two sips of tea before turning to Zhang Xiaohu and asked, "Deputy station head Zhang, report to me what happened yesterday."

Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly stood up and said, "Station head Luo does not have to be so courteous, I was lucky to be looked upon favourably by fourth master Wen to be your assistant but I am still a delivery hand so you only need to address me

as Zhang Xiaohu.”

Station head Luo smiled and said, “Deputy station head Zhang may only be a simple delivery hand, but you have also learnt the more profound martial arts in the martial arts school, so isn’t it certain that you will become a station head in the future? I am addressing you like this in advance, don’t you think so?”

Zhang Xiaohu modestly replied, “As long as I am not station head, I should not be addressed as such, don’t you agree to that as well?”

Station head Luo smiled but he was obviously in disagreement.

Zhang Xiaohu saw station head Luo remained silent and knew that the other party was slightly jealous of him for being able to learn martial arts from the martial arts school, and furthermore, the roles of an assistant head was appointed to him personally by fourth master Wen, so he did not argue anymore on the topic and said in a professional tone, “The discussion with the merchant yesterday happened like this.”

Following this, Zhang Xiaohu recounted all the details of the discussion between him and the merchant while station head Luo nodded occasionally as he sipped on his tea, and after Zhang Xiaohu finished his report, the latter said, “You have done well, deputy station head. Everything will be as you have proposed, so you can send them a reply of our confirmation later.”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded his head in understanding and said, “In that case, station head Luo, I shall take my leave and inform the other brothers to prepare to set off in a few days’ time.”

Station head Luo nodded and said, “Alright, give them some notice. We have stayed here for long, and the New Year has already passed.”

Zhang Xiaohu bowed and turned around to prepare to leave.

At that moment, station head Luo spoke up again, “Deputy station head Zhang, hold on.”

Zhang Xiaohu quickly retraced his steps, turned around and asked, “Station head Luo, what is the matter?”

Station head Luo smiled and said, “It is like this, deputy station head Zhang,

since you are appointed as a leader, you should lead by example and be a good role model for the rest, don't you think so?"

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised as he asked, "Station head Luo, please remind me if I have done anything wrong recently. I am still not familiar with the rules of the escort station so there are still many areas where I have to learn from you."

Station head Luo was pleased when he heard Zhang Xiaohu's reply, he smiled and said, "Actually, it is nothing much, but when these people leave the station for the job, the escort station has to bear the cost of their accommodation and food. Everyone's daily needs are provided up to a certain quality which you are well aware of, and the costs of all these necessities are explicitly recorded in the account books, so how would I be able to explain myself if any of these expenses are out of the ordinary? Since your little brother had suddenly appeared, our expenses for food and accommodation will need to be adjusted accordingly."

Zhang Xiaohu's face changed greatly upon hearing this.

Chapter 140: Return journey (1)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Return journey (1)

Zhang Xiaohu pondered for a moment and his face returned to its usual colour, he smiled and said, “No problem, station head Luo, I am still inexperienced and have overlooked this matter. I didn’t realize that my younger brother’s arrival would cause so much trouble to the team. In that case, Zhang Xiaohua will stay in my room, and I will report the other expenses to the bookkeeper so he can record the expenses separately, and I shall settle the outstanding amount after we return to the escort station again.”

Station head Luo smiled and said, “That would be best, deputy station head Zhang. Do not misunderstand me, these details are something that we leaders have to take note of in order for other people to not question our ethics and methods. If not, it will not be good when they turned in their complaints to the station. I am not attacking you personally so I hope you do not get offended.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and replied, “Why would I blame you, you are doing this for my own good. I would still need station head to remind me on more of such matters in the future. Alright, I shall take my leave now if there is nothing else.”

Station head Luo smiled as he waved his hands, “There are no others matters, I feel assured when you are in charge. It has been hard on you during this trip, I will let fourth master Wen know of your effort when we return.”

Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly cupped his fists and said, “Station head Luo is the person who has put in the most work, I dare not claim his efforts to be mine.”

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly exited the main room.

As station head Luo watched Zhang Xiaohu’s back as the latter left, the smile on his face turned into a scornful smirk.

After Zhang Xiaohu left the room, he first announced the matter of their planned departure back to Pingyang city to the rest and instructed them to make their own preparations. Everyone was ecstatic upon hearing the news and they whooped in joy before scattering back to their respective rooms.

Zhang Xiaohu waited for everyone to finish their celebration before he called the bookkeeper in front of them and told him to keep a separate record of his younger brother's expenses in the book from the until they returned to Pingyang city.

The bookkeeper was surprised, he asked, "Head Zhang'er, why bother doing this?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "My younger brother joined us by coincidence and have added pressure to our finances, his food and accommodation will be unfairly borne by our brother's hard earned money, so it is better if you keep a separate account so I can settle his expenses with the escort station when we return."

The bookkeeper was still confused and he continued, "He is only a child so how much additional expense will he bring to us? I don't think there is a need to do this."

The surrounding people were also confused, and Yuan Changqing even said loudly, "Don't bother, head Zhang'er, Zhang Xiaohua is not just your younger brother, he is also all of our little brother, so who cares if he eats or drinks a little here? Why do we need to draw a separate line? It makes us look distant instead."

Zhang Xiaohu only smiled as he looked at the rest but he still instructed the bookkeeper to keep a separate account.

The courtyard was not large so Zhang Xiaohua who was in the room could still overhear their conversation. When Zhang Xiaohu returned to his room, he hurriedly asked the former, "Second brother, what is the matter? Have I caused you trouble by coming here?"

Zhang Xiaohu pinched his little face and said, "It's nothing, aren't you just giving us only a little more expenses to bear? Not to mention all the silvers that you harvested from yesterday, wouldn't Huanxi mountain villa provide its

employees additional allowance for outside journeys? Just give them the extra money instead of inviting any unwanted idle talk.”

“Oh...” Zhang Xiaohu became enlightened and he said, “Did station head Luo say this, why is he so picky?”

Zhang Xiaohu patted Zhang Xiaohua’s head and said lovingly, “You are still young, wait till you grow older and you will understand naturally by then.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded thoughtfully, his mind was quick to realize the situation even though Zhang Xiaohu did not reveal much. Since the matter was raised up, how could he not understand what happened?

Unfortunately, he did not really come for a mission so he was unsure if the mountain villa would provide an allowance for him. If there wasn’t any, he would have to take a portion of his savings and give it to Lotus escort, and just the thought of it made his heart ache, so he felt rather displeased with the station head.

How could Zhang Xiaohua be the only person who was unhappy with the station head? Everyone in the courtyard who had heard Zhang Xiaohu’s words were at first curious, so they asked the bookkeeper secretly seeing that Zhang Xiaohu was unwilling to elaborate. Hence, it did not take much effort for them to figure out the truth, and many of them scolded station head Luo severely in their hearts while feeling more admiration towards Zhang Xiaohu, and thus, their opinion of these two leaders differed even more.

The following days were ordinary, Zhang Xiaohua did not dare to step out of the courtyard since he had to pay for his own expenses, what a joke, how could he bear to do so?

Actually, the real reason why Zhang Xiaohua stayed indoors was because he had been alone outside in the wilderness for a while, so he could not bear to leave the company of the team after finding them with so much difficulties. Furthermore, where could he go in this chilly weather? Look for flowers in the snow-filled mountains? Please, Zhang Xiaohua just returned from there, why would he want to go back so soon?

Furthermore, Zhang Xiaohua recently stirred some trouble in town so Zhang Xiaohu was honestly afraid that the other party would return for revenge, so he

nagged at Zhang Xiaohua to persuade him to stay within the confines of the station.

Zhang Xiaohua liked this kind of lifestyle as well, when he had nothing to do in the morning, afternoon and evening, he would practice his fist martial arts in the courtyard. There were many delivery hands who were doing the same thing in the courtyard as well so Zhang Xiaohua did not attract much attention, but as for elder Yu's sword martial art, Zhang Xiaohua could not practice it so he would wave his small sword around in the privacy of Zhang Xiaohu's room instead.

The thing that made Zhang Xiaohua happiest was that at the bookkeeper's room, he found many travel journals that described the affairs of faraway places. Zhang Xiaohua felt as though he picked up a treasure and begged with his life to borrow them to read, and the bookkeeper who had not read them himself gave in despite being reluctant initially. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua would read the journals at times and practice his martial arts when he felt bored.

While Zhang Xiaohua was idling away, Zhang Xiaohu was kept busier instead as almost all the matters in the escort team were handled by him. As for station head Luo, he became a taichi master who would redirect most of the work to him, so Zhang Xiaohu was naturally busy like hell and out most of the times to discuss the matters relating to the activation of the escort team with the merchant client, so much so that even Zhang Xiaohua would not see him often.

However, Zhang Xiaohua had one thing he was jealous of his brother. Zhang Xiaohu would not practice his martial arts the way he would anymore, every night when the former returned back to his room, he would sit down in a lotus position and start to meditate. While Zhang Xiaohu was practicing his inner energy techniques, Zhang Xiaohua would daze at a corner not daring to disturb the former. But for most of the times, Zhang Xiaohu would wait for Zhang Xiaohua to fall asleep before he practiced his martial arts.

After working so busily for those few days, everyone in the escort team had finally packed their belongings and the discussion with the merchant had come to a close. On that particular day, the homesick people in the escort station finally saw the day when they would set off back to Pingyang city.

It was a bright and sunny day and even though the snow had yet to melt, the

wind which came from the north was no longer as chilly, so it was the perfect day to begin their journey.

At the entrance of the small courtyard, the escort team's belongings filled up four carriages fully to the brim, while at the side of the procession was many horses. Zhang Xiaohua placed his second brother's belongings inside a carriage and looked enviously at the escorts and delivery hands who were standing beside the horses. After such a long time, he has yet to experience riding on a horse yet.

Not long later, some horses rushed over from the alley, and they were indeed Zhang Xiaohu and the rest who had escorted their merchant client over to the carriages. There were more carriages from the merchant's side and the total procession added up to around twenty carriages. Hence, the two groups formed into a large one, and after some check calls, the whole procession began to move.

Although Zhang Xiaohua would have his meals and activities in the courtyard, he didn't realize that there were so many people until right before they were about to depart when he counted dozens of people from the escort team.

Right then, it was Zhang Xiaohu and his team who were leading the way to scout in advance while most part of the procession was guarded by station head leader Luo and the other bodyguards. Around the carriages which belonged to the merchant which contained their products were small triangular flags with the word "Lotus" embroidered on them. As for the end of the procession, it was where Zhang Xiaohu and the other delivery hands were located, and apart from the bookkeeper and a few helpers, most of the rest were riding on the horses while bearing weapons on their waist looking awe-inspiring.

Even though there were many people and carriages, everyone was disciplined so there was no disorder at all. Not long later, the procession left the small town and was travelling on the highway. Zhang Xiaohua initially thought that with such a large procession and many carriages, movement would become cumbersome and slow but he was proven wrong as the speed of their advance was no slower than the carriages which Ou Yan and the others used on their journey.

Even though Zhang Xiaohua wanted to ride on his own horse, he was still

arranged to sit in one of the carriages with the bookkeeper and the other helpers. At the beginning, Zhang Xiaohu did not have much time to accompany him so he could only ask the bookkeeper to look after Zhang Xiaohua in his stead. When they reached the highway and the procession was travelling at a steady pace, Zhang Xiaohu took some time off from the front of the procession and went to the carriages at the back. When he saw Zhang Xiaohua's unhappy expression, he asked, "Xiaohua, we are already on the road back to Pingyang city so why are you still unhappy?"

Zhang Xiaohua pursed his lips and said, "I am of course glad that we are going back, but I can't always be sitting in the carriage. I want to ride a horse as well, and I can see some horses without any riders at the back. Can you let me ride them?"

"Haha," Zhang Xiaohu laughed when he heard Zhang Xiaohua's complaint, he said, "So it is like this. Xiaohua, it is not that I don't wish for you to ride them, but horse riding is a skill to be acquired and if you have never ridden a horse before, you will need to take some lessons first before getting on one. The horses in our station are used to travelling out on jobs and are much wilder so they are not suitable for beginners like you. We can discuss this again when we reach the escort station and I can also find you a milder horse there."

Zhang Xiaohua realized that horse riding was not as simple as he thought after listening to Zhang Xiaohu's explanation, but he was still adamant and said, "Aren't the horses at the back mild? Let me try riding them too."

Zhang Xiaohu's expression straightened as he replied, "Xiaohua, don't be stubborn. We are escorting a client, how can I let you be so wilful? Even though the horses at the back seem mild, it will be a different case when they have a rider on their backs. Furthermore, those horses are to be used in an emergency if the horses at the front encounter an accident, so they cannot be used so casually."

Zhang Xiaohua helplessly rolled his eyes and did not speak further after hearing Zhang Xiaohu's explanation.

Actually, a person's personality can be quite strange. Take Zhang Xiaohua for example, his behaviour and mindset would be mature like an adult when he is

alone but if a relative or elder is beside him, he would revert to a childlike mentality more appropriate for someone his age. Perhaps, this is due to the human nature of habit and reliance.

Since he could not ride a horse, Zhang Xiaohua did not press any further and obediently looked out at the scenery.

The scenery outside was not much different from before, the snow and ice from winter had yet to melt but there were hints of green life in the fields and forests outside. Occasionally, there would be some movement in the river, or some mischievous children bringing their dogs to play in the snow.

The procession's speed was very fast and the chilly wind would blow generously into the carriages. Zhang Xiaohua draped a cotton shirt over his body out of habit, and this cotton shirt belonged to his second brother Zhang Xiaohu. As for the travelling clothes that he wore initially, they were already washed and kept by Zhang Xiaohu who could not help but cry when he packed them, his younger brother has no new clothes to wear to pass the New Year and even though it was still winter, he was still wearing travelling clothes meant for autumn weather which was even torn by a knife. He could only lament that there was too little time and the coat shops were still closed in celebration so his younger brother had to make do with his own cotton shirt. Even though Zhang Xiaohua insisted that he did not feel cold, how could Zhang Xiaohu believe his words? Hence, Zhang Xiaohua wore the oversized cotton shirt which had large gaps of the cold biting wind to blow through.

When the bookkeeper who was sitting beside saw this, he shrunk his neck and asked, "Xiaohua, aren't you cold?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "Nope, Mr. Mo, I don't feel cold at all."

Mr. Mo smiled and said, "Such a sensible child, it is fine. If you feel cold, I still have another woollen coat, and although it is too large for you as well, it should be enough for to block the wind.

Zhang Xiaohua was speechless for a moment, he smiled and said, "It is fine, I can still endure it even though the weather is slightly cold. How can youths grow up faster if they can't bear the cold?"

It was strange sometimes, Zhang Xiaohua was obviously not feeling cold when

he said the truth, others would think that he was trying to reassure them and felt that he was a sensible boy which made them care for him even more. Hence, Zhang Xiaohua came to the realization that he could not speak the entire truth, but pepper some falsehood with truth at the same time.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the scenery for another while before feeling bored again so he asked, “Mr. Mo, I have a question to ask you.”

Mr. Mo said, “Sure, what problem did you encounter?”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “Mr. Mo, I feel that the weather and scenery outside seem to differ from the areas closer to Pingyang city. I am guessing that Pingyang city should be extremely cold by now, with heavy cold winds and thick layers of snow, and the trees should be bare of their leaves, but it is not like so over here. Even though there is much snow, I don’t feel too cold and the wind carries slight warmth. If you look over there, you can even see something green that is growing.”

Mr. Mo smiled as he explained, “You are right, Zhang Xiaohua, the weather is indeed different here compared to around Pingyang city. The weather feels warmer because the humidity is higher so you don’t feel as cold as you would in Pingyang city.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Why is that so?”

Mr. Mo replied, “That is simple, here is south of Pingyang city and is closer to the sea.”

“Sea? Ah!”, Zhang Xiaohua yelped out involuntarily, “I almost forgot that I have not seen the sea from here yet!”

Zhang Xiaohua patted the back of his head regretfully, why did he not remember to view the sea during the last few days when everyone was preparing to return? According to the books, the sea was vast and boundless, and it shared the same colour as the sky, while the entire scenery would be grand and beautiful. Zhang Xiaohua wanted to see this for himself yet now that he was so close to the sea, how could he miss the opportunity like that?”

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua’s upset expression, Mr. Mo smiled and said, “It is alright, you can always come back again to see the sea. The town we were in is

close to a small part of the inland sea so you would not be able to see much. If you want to experience the boundlessness of the sea, it is better to take a boat out and travel.”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled bitterly since he had no other choice.

He asked, “You mentioned that this weather is related to the sea?”

Mr. Mo explained, “The town is near the sea so its humidity is naturally higher, and the sea water would not freeze even in winter so they can affect the weather around it. Furthermore, this place is naturally closer to the south than Pingyang city so you would feel much warmer here.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head in acknowledgement as though he understood the explanation, then pondered for a moment before asking again, “In that case, Mr. Mo, if I continue to go south, won’t it be warmer there?”

Mr. Mo smiled as he replied, “That’s right. According to what I know, the southernmost place is a large expanse of sea and the weather there is always warm so you cannot see any snow.”

“Ah? It’s like that?” Zhang Xiaohua became surprised, “If so, then the children over there will not be able to build snowmen and have snow fights. They’re so pitiful.”

Mr. Mo said, “That’s right, but they will have their own source of entertainment which you don’t have. On the other hands, if you continue to head northwards, there is another sea there which is frozen throughout the year, and the ice is even taller than mountains. The people there supposedly use ice to build their homes.”

“Ah? That’s so strange.” Zhang Xiaohua felt surprised again, he said, “If there is only winter throughout the year, they will not get to enjoy playing in the river, that’s very pitiful as well.”

Mr. Mo said, “Actually, there are many amazing places in this world just that we are unaware of them. How great will it be if we can transverse the entire world.”

As he shared his perspective, many little stars appeared in Mr. Mo’s eyes.

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “In that case, why don’t Mr. Mo head out to explore the world? Even if you cannot visit every single place, touring around an area is still possible right?”

Mr. Mo replied in a helpless tone, “There are too many things that are beyond our understanding in this world, there are uncountable dangers out there but I do not have the ability to protect myself from them so how would I dare to go over? Even after leaving Pingyang city for two days, I will find myself in danger of being eaten by wild beasts. Sigh, there is no choice but to read other people’s travel journals to satisfy my curiosity.”

Zhang Xiaohua also felt some empathy when heard the other party spoke of his view, there were many things in this world that required power to run. He would naturally become food for the wild beasts If he stubbornly went out to explore the world without any self-preservation abilities.

The two continued to chat for some time but perhaps because Mr. Mo woke up early that day, he became sleepy and closed his eyes to doze off. Zhang Xiaohua did not continue to talk, he searched for the travel journals in his knapsack and took one out to read.

Even if he could not visit the place himself, reading about them through books was still fun in itself.

Time passed like that, and the procession did not stop for lunch. Instead, Zhang Xiaohu rode his horse over and passed Zhang Xiaohua and the rest some dry rations which they casually ate while they continued to hurry on the road.

Chapter 141: Return journey (2)

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Return journey (2)

The procession continued to hurry until nightfall when it slowed up and reached a village. However, how could the village have an inn to accommodate everyone in the procession? Hence, the people from the station set up an encampment to pass the night.

After a painful lesson from being attacked in the night, Zhang Xiaohua pulled Zhang Xiaohu to aside and shared his concerns in private. Zhang Xiaohu stroke Zhang Xiaohua's head and said, "There shouldn't be a problem. Look, our encampment is right in front of a village and there are so many witnesses around. Even if anyone has any ill-intentions towards us, they would still hesitate to act so blatantly in front of so many people. Moreover, today is only the first day of our trip so everyone is still being on their guards, a robber would usually wait for a few more days before making their move."

Zhang Xiaohu paused for a moment and continued, "Furthermore, this route has been tried and tested many times by the escort station. Even if we seem to be hurrying, our progress is all planned beforehand and as long as no accidents occur along the way, the entire journey will be completely within our control. Don't look down on station head Luo as well, he has contributed much to the station and is very experienced in doing such jobs."

Seeing Zhang Xiaohua's unconvinced expression, he said, "Alright, just watch on if you don't believe me. At the same time, it is also a good opportunity for you to learn how the station works, and perhaps you can become a bodyguard when you grow up. Oh right, I have been meaning to ask you, how are your injuries so far?"

Zhang Xiaohua rolled his sleeves up and extended his hand to show his second brother who felt relieved when he saw that it was more or less recovered. He said, “Fortunately you are still young. It might take an adult several more days to heal from this kind of injury.”

Afterwards, he thought of something else and asked, “Xiaohua, about your right hand, how is it...”

Zhang Xiaohua knew that his second brother was worried for his injury so he smiled cheerfully and said, “It is almost fully recovered. I can still feel that my fingers are more nimble and can exert more strength than before, it seems that there is only a bit more to recover before my fist can clench fully.”

Zhang Xiaohua raised his right hand and clenched it forcefully, and when Zhang Xiaohu saw him do so, he said, “Alright, I can see it” while his eyes became watery.

It was pretty normal for Zhang Xiaohu to react this way since he brought his younger brother out, yet his younger brother got injured for his sake. Therefore, how could he not feel affected?

Now that his younger brother’s right hand is recovering and will be like before soon after, how could Zhang Xiaohu maintain his composure? He would naturally feel ecstatic and relieved.

However, he still had some doubts remaining since Zhang Xiaohua’s hand was personally examined by the physician from the escort station. The physician had practiced for several decades and accumulated much experience in mending fractures and reconnecting ligaments so his judgement could not be overlooked. About this, Zhang Xiaohu could not help but wonder if his younger brother’s recovery had exceeded the physician’s estimation, or if it would no longer get any better than then.

Nevertheless, Zhang Xiaohu still felt pleased as the condition of Zhang Xiaohua’s hand was still far better than his expectations, no matter what the physician said. Even if the latter could no longer practice martial arts, the injury would not be too much of a hindrance to his daily life.

After giving Zhang Xiaohua a few more instructions, Zhang Xiaohu left hurriedly to do his other tasks.

The encampment was set up in an orderly fashion and was finished not long after so Zhang Xiaohua could not find an opportunity to lend a hand. After asking for Zhang Xiaohu's quarters, Zhang Xiaohua took some stuff from the carriage and headed towards the direction.

Not long later, Yuan Changqing went over to call Zhang Xiaohua. After the former learnt of the matter to separate the accounts, he would dote more on the boy and find him whenever he had something good to eat. Zhang Xiaohua naturally did not stand on the ceremony and followed the man for dinner.

Zhang Xiaohua slept very soundly that night and when he opened his eyes the next morning, the first thing he said was, "Second brother, was there an attack last night?"

Zhang Xiaohu did not know whether to laugh or cry, he mock scolded, "Are you fully awake yet?"

After breakfast, the people from the station broke camp and continued on their journey.

After over a dozen of such days, there was still no robbery or wild animal attacks so Zhang Xiaohua began to suspect if Ou Yan's trip was out of the ordinary for such a trip.

As they reached closer to the north, the weather became colder and the chilly wind blew harder. The triangular flags with the two words "Lotus" fluttered more violently and loudly against the wind.

On that particular day, the procession was travelling on a long mountainous path so their speed was slower than on the highway.

Zhang Xiaohu was riding his mount at the back of the procession beside the carriage Zhang Xiaohua was sitting in at a leisurely pace.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the forest on both sides of the road which was covered in snow, he thought to himself, "Isn't this similar to the first robbery our party faced during our trip? Will mountain bandits appear here?"

While he was preoccupied with his thoughts, a loud voice boomed from ahead, "These trees belong to me, this path was opened by me. Pay a toll if you wish to pass!"

Zhang Xiaohua's eyes gleamed and he called out, "Is there a robbery?"

Zhang Xiaohu glanced at Zhang Xiaohua helplessly, he said, "Why are you so excited about being robbed?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "The previous time our party met with mountain bandits, they had three sparring matches with us so it was quite entertaining. Furthermore, don't we have dozens of people on our side? Why would we be afraid of them? Won't we defeat the other side very quickly?"

"Sigh..." Zhang Xiaohu thought secretly, "Xiaohua wants to watch the action."

He scolded, "Even though you only met a dozen or people during your robbery, not all mountain bandits have that many members. Even if we have many people on our side, how can we control the situation if we are facing a hundred opponents? Won't we still become a slain tiger?"

"Ah... so it's like this." Zhang Xiaohua cried in shock, "What should we do then? Who knows how many people do they have and how skilled they are? Will second brother be fine?"

Zhang Xiaohu comforted the latter, he said, "Xiaohua, stay in the carriage while I go up to the front. Perhaps station Luo already has everything under his control."

Zhang Xiaohua disobeyed and begged, "Second brother, bring me along with you as well. I don't get to see mountain bandits often so let me see them too, alright?" As he spoke, he began to act cute and adorable.

Zhang Xiaohu looked at his younger brother adoringly, he pondered for a moment and said, "Alright, you can sit behind me. However, remember to remain silent when we are over there."

Zhang Xiaohua immediately jumped off the carriage upon hearing his reply and in a puff of smoke, he reappeared in front of Zhang Xiaohu's mount. Zhang Xiaohu bent over to grab his hand, exerted some force, and pulled Zhang Xiaohua onto his back before urging the mount to move forward.

The twenty carriages made a long procession and the bodyguards and delivery hands from the station took out their weapons and surrounded all the carriages warily, unlike Zhang Xiaohua who moved forward to watch the action.

Zhang Xiaohu urged his mount to the front unhurriedly, there was an empty space in front of the first carriage and several bodyguards were already standing there. Station head Luo who usually showed a lazy and unreliable side was mounted on his horse with a long spear in his hands and a cold expression on his face.

Zhang Xiaohua carefully peeped from behind his second brother's back, he could not help but gasp at the scene before him.

There were not just ten or two people like he expected. Instead, ten or more men were on horseback bearing various types of weapons were glaring coldly back at them, while dozens of men were standing in neat rows behind them. There was no hint of disorder like the group of mountain bandits Zhang Xiaohua met previously, but the thing that made Zhang Xiaohua most frightened was the seemingly many people hiding in the forest on both sides of the road surrounding the procession completely.

Zhang Xiaohua asked softly, "Second brother, what shall we do? Do we have to fight with them even if we are no match for so many people? Where is your weapon? You have to stay careful."

Zhang Xiaohu was calm and he replied softly, "Do not talk, Xiaohua. Just watch on quietly."

Zhang Xiaohua immediately shut his mouth.

At that moment, station head Luo made the first move and rode his horse to the front, cupped his fists and said, "May I know which friends am I meeting right now, and who is your representative?"

Upon hearing this, a red faced man also rode his horse forward from the other side and stopped in front of station head Luo, he cupped his fists and replied, "I am Withered grass mountain's head Yang Shuo, may I know how to address you?"

Station head Luo said, "I am Pingyang city's Lotus escort station head Luo Duanhe, and am currently on a mission to protect my client, so would this friend please spare his fist?"

The mountain bandit head wrinkled his brows and said, "So it's a friend from

the afar Piaomiao sect, may I take a look at your banner?”

Upon hearing this, station head Luo followed the rules and replied, “Head Yang, please wait for a moment.”

He rode his horse back to re-join the procession and shouted aloud, “Raise the banner”. Two bodyguards got off their horses in response and respectfully took down the banner from the first carriage before walking over to the station head Luo and passing it to him. Station head Luo received the banner and rode back to where the other representative was waiting and displayed the banner. Head Yang studied the banner, nodded and cupped his fists again. He smiled and said, “It is indeed friends from Piaomiao sect, I have delayed you unintentionally. If there is an opportunity in the future, you are welcomed to visit our mountain again.”

Station head Luo smiled and replied, “Alright, it’s a promise then. We are currently in a hurry so we will pay our proper greetings next time instead.”

Head Yang replied, “In that case, I wish you a smooth trip. This mountain is ours so there should be no obstructions for five hundred li.”

After finishing his sentence, he threw a plaque which station head Luo caught. Station head Luo replied, “Many thanks in that case. Our escort station is very grateful of head Yan’s kind generosity.”

Head Yang nodded and said, “Station head Luo is too kind, I won’t be sending you off.”

He then raised his hands and instructed the few men behind him to follow his lead as they left.

When station head Luo saw that the other party had left, he also rode back and ordered the bodyguards before carrying on with the procession again.

Zhang Xiaohu brought Zhang Xiaohua back to the tail of the procession after he saw that everything ended. However, Zhang Xiaohua refused to get off the horse no matter what so Zhang Xiaohu said helplessly, “I shall let you ride a little longer, and you will have to return to your own carriage after I reach the front of the procession.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head profusely.

When Zhang Xiaohua followed the procession to the empty space where the exchange occurred earlier, the carriages already left the area and Zhang Xiaohua saw a bodyguard whom station head Luo instructed previously pass an item to one of the bandits who was waiting at a side. After the bandit received the item, he checked it before flashing a smile and cupping his fists and rode away.

The bodyguard also rode off to catch up with the rest of the procession.

Zhang Xiaohua was confused on what he just saw so he whispered to Zhang Xiaohu, “Second brother, why is the robbery so strange? How come it ended without any fighting or three sparring matches?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and asked, “What do you think a robbery should look like? Just fighting and killing?”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “Isn’t it fighting and killing with the victor obtaining all the other party’s possessions?”

Zhang Xiaohu was not surprised by the question and he replied, “Haha, there is nothing wrong which what you are assuming, I used to think the same way as well and sweated so profusely during my first case of robbery. However, after a few times of thunderstorm that turned into a drizzle, I finally understood the situation.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked curiously, “Can there be something else behind the scenes?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and explained, “It is actually very simple. Mountain bandits rob merchants to obtain the wealth that we carry. If they were to fight and kill every time they see a merchant, wouldn’t they die off very fast? As the saying goes, one loses eight hundred men to kill a thousand men, while it might be rewarding if their robbery was a success, how can there such easy money-making business in this world? Not to mention us, there are many merchants passing by this area so wouldn’t it be a goldmine for robbers? If there was fighting and killing all the time, how many brothers would you lose as a result? Hence, robbing is an art and robbers would tend to avoid fighting if possible. Even if they earn less each time, wouldn’t it add up to a significant sum over time?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded as he pondered deeply, he thought, “As the saying

goes, there are exemplary people in all types of occupations, even being a mountain bandit requires talent.”

Zhang Xiaohu continued, “When a merchant sets off on a journey, he is usually aware of such dangers so if he is not carrying anything valuable, he would naturally not be afraid of bandits. If they are carrying many goods, they would need to find an escort and that is what escort stations do. Escort stations and mountain bandits are similar entities; they use their power to pursue wealth. If you solely rely on power each time, every mountain bandit will have poor relationships with you and your escort station will fail soon after because you will end up fighting too much. Hence, reputation is important among escort stations. If you have a better reputation, more mountain bandits’ groups will recognize you and cooperate more willingly.”

“Cooperate?” Zhang Xiaohua was slightly surprised.

“That’s right, cooperate, which is to say that the escort station will give the mountain bandits some money which is proportional to the value of goods they are protecting. The mountain bandits will be happy to accept this money like you saw earlier, and thus, escort stations do not need to fear mountain bandits even when travelling as far as hundreds of li.” Zhang Xiaohu explained.

Zhang Xiaohua was still confused and he said, “Second brother, from the sound of things, it seems that both of you are good friends with each other.”

Zhang Xiaohu’s eyes curved into a smile as he said, “A family of snakes and mice, that’s what we are.”

Zhang Xiaohua continued to ask, “Will the merchants have to pay the same amount of money if there is no escort team escorting them?”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “If there was no escort team, the merchant becomes a tantalizing piece of fresh meat so how can they resist swallowing them? Mountain bandits would not let them off at all.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked again, “There were so many mountain bandits earlier, we would have succumbed to them anyway so why don’t they attack us? Even if they suffer casualties, their harvest would still make their efforts worthwhile.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “Another factor that comes into play is the size

of the escort station. If we were a small escort station, there might be such an outcome earlier on. However, the Lotus escort has the backing of Piaomiao sect. In other words, we are the business arm of Piaomiao sect so if they had dared to attack us, the Piaomiao sect would easily dispatch a few disciples to clear out their hideout. Do you think they would be willing to risk this danger?"

Zhang Xiaohu grew more excited as he spoke, "There is also another point I have yet to cover. Mountain bandits usually cannot survive by themselves without any support from Jianghu, meaning if this bandit group attacked us, the sect behind them would be challenging the authority of Piaomiao sect indirectly. A war might result and Piaomiao sect might call a mountain bandit group they are affiliated with to clear out this group of mountain bandits."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded in understanding, he said, "Okay, I got it. In short, power is might. If one is strong enough, everyone will be happy to work harmoniously with you. Otherwise, you can only set yourselves up to the wolves. In that case, do you think that Piaomiao sect was the backer of the Xicui mountain bandits at our hometown?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "I am unsure about this, but the Xicui mountain bandits are too weak a group so even if Piaomiao sect was their backer, they would not pay much attention to the group."

Zhang Xiaohua let out a sigh, he said, "The Jianghu world is so complex."

He then said joyfully, "In that case, isn't our escort team very safe and not likely to enter any fight?"

Zhang Xiaohu smiled bitterly and said, "How can it be as easy as you think? There are always stupid mountain bandits who would rather chose to step towards their death. Don't you see the escort station recruiting new delivery hands and bodyguards every year? However, I am only a delivery hand so I still won't be called to arms if a real fight breaks out."

Zhang Xiaohua turned quiet when he heard this.

Chapter 142: Misunderstanding

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Misunderstanding

And thus, a robbery in Jianghu concluded like that.

Zhang Xiaohua who was initially anticipating some action got a lesson from Zhang Xiaohu instead. even though he did not witness the violence and bloodthirstiness of Jianghu, the experience reinforced his idea that power was might in Jianghu.

For the following days, Zhang Xiaohua would pray fervently to not encounter any mountain bandits, and his attitude was a stark contrast from the light heartedness when he began the journey.

However, the winds and rain in Jianghu did not follow the wishes of one person and the journey was not travelled only on the safe highways. Every so often, they would meet bandits who did not have eyes and ignored the reputation of Lotus escort and Piaomiao sect, but their strengths were less than fart so they did not pose any threat to the escort team. Even though they all succumbed to the escort team led by station head Luo, but the swords do not have eyes and some of the bodyguards got injured. Although the escort team had good medicine and one of the station's best physicians following with them, one of the bodyguards whose wrist was broken became crippled even though he managed to keep his life.

For the rest of the journey, the injured bodyguard would lie down in the carriage beside Zhang Xiaohua, and when Zhang Xiaohua occasionally glanced over at the casualty, his normally cheerful mood would dampen upon seeing the bodyguard's dejected and listless expression.

Fortunately, the escort team's strength was sufficient to hold on despite that

single bodyguard. Even though Zhang Xiaohua was still upset, station head Luo was overjoyed and relieved from what he perceived as a smooth journey.

The small town close to the sea was very far from Pingyang city so the procession journeyed for several months before reaching the vicinity of Pingyang city. The procession was expected to reach their homeground in the afternoon but was delayed from the breakdown of one of the carriages, so they arrived at a remote village during the afternoon instead. The bodyguards seemed to be sensitive to the fact that they were reaching their destination. If it was a few days ago, the procession would set up camp in the village for the night, but on that day, everyone including station head Luo agreed to rush back even if they had to travel through the night. Thus, the procession continued to move until they arrived at a small boundary town before midnight.

After they entered the town, station head Luo took a deep breath and shouted aloud, “Brothers, we have finally reached our homeground, haha.”

Everyone was in a celebratory mood and some would look at the sleeping Zhang Xiaohua in confusion.

For the next few days, the escort team was evidently not as vigilant as before so journey became more relaxed. Thus, it was at night when the procession finally reached Pingyang city.

Even though Pingyang city was called a city beside water, it was deep inland and there was no natural defence. Hence, only one of the four city gates would be opened at night, and this was also another reason for why the procession tried to rush through the night. After all, who would not want to return to the escort station earlier, have a good wash and early sleep that night?

Of course, Zhang Xiaohua had already fallen asleep under the unhygienic conditions much earlier before the procession reached the city.

The procession rushed to the escort station but the door was already closed because of the time. Someone went up and knocked “dong dong” on the door. The person who answered immediately opened the door without complaints when he saw that the visitors were his comrades who had returned from an outside job. The twenty plus people entered the door and rushed through the field, the noise they made was not soft so the other guards were alerted

straightaway. The head guard first congratulated station head Luo for bringing the procession back safely before turning to Zhang Xiaohu and said, “Zhang Xiaohu, you have finally returned. Fourth master Wen has been asking for your whereabouts for the past few days and he has instructed you to find him immediately after you returned.”

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised, what could the reason be? He confirmed his uncertainty with the guard, “Must I go over even if it is past midnight?”

The guard smiled bitterly and replied, “The fourth master did not give any particular timing restrictions in his instructions. Since you’re back now, it might be better to go over to take a look if he is awake first so that you don’t anger him.”

Zhang Xiaohu pondered and said, “Alright, thanks for the reminder.”

Zhang Xiaohu went to the field and brought the sleeping Zhang Xiaohua back into his room before packing his belongings and carrying them back as well. He then entered the inner courtyard and walked towards fourth master Wen’s room.

It was already past midnight and the courtyard was eerily quiet. Zhang Xiaohu walked stealthily to the door before deliberating again. Just as he was about to knock, and aged voice called from inside, “Who is it? What is the matter for coming here so late at night?”

The voice came out of nowhere and gave Zhang Xiaohu a fright, he felt admiration towards the elder. As the saying goes, older ginger is spicier and fourth master Wen’s inner energy was indeed one of the most profound within the Lotus escort. He was noticed straightaway just when he neared the door, Zhang Xiaohu wondered when he could ever reach this level.

On the other hand, fourth master Wen was feeling vexed by the uninvited visitor, he scolded secretly, “Where on earth did such an annoying child appear, where is his sense of respect for elders? It is difficult for an old man like me to fall asleep yet he chose to wake me up tonight of all nights when I happen to feel sleepy. You just gave my feeble heart a fright and I would have jumped out of the window if you did not raise your hand to knock on the door.”

Zhang Xiaohu straightened his back and replied respectfully, “It’s me, Zhang

Xiaohu.”

“Zhang Xiaohu?” Fourth elder Wen hesitated, “Why have you come over at this time?”

Zhang Xiaohu became surprised when he heard the elder’s question, he answered anxiously, “Fourth master, I just came back from a job outside and the guard at the door told me that you were looking for me, and I was told to report to you the moment I came back.”

“Ah!” Fourth master Wen became agitated, “So it’s for this matter, cough...”

Fourth master Wen coughed a few times from his frustration, he drank some water and continued, “Have I said that before? Even if I did, there is no need for you to come back knocking at the middle of the night.”

Zhang Xiaohu replied in an embarrassed tone, “The guard said that you sounded urgent and though it was for an important matter. If it is nothing, I shall go back and come over again tomorrow morning.”

Upon hearing this, fourth master Wen replied, “Oh, I got it. I instructed about this matter a month ago and it has almost been two months since then. Sigh, one becomes more forgetful as he grows older. Alright, you don’t need to go back, just give me a minute to get up. I guess that this night was going to be another sleepless one again.”

Zhang Xiaohu waited at the door before he was invited into the room.

The two men seated themselves and fourth master Wen poured a cup of water for Zhang Xiaohu. After Zhang Xiaohu finished the water, fourth master Wen looked at him and said, “Zhang Xiaohu, this job has taken a long while, you must have suffered much,”

Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly replied, “I dare not, fourth master. I was only assisting station head Luo as his deputy, most matters were handled by him so I did not have to do much at all.”

Fourth master Wen smiled and said, “The job ran over the New Year so there must be some unhappiness, what was the feedback from the other men?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “There was not much complaints but they did request

for a higher pay. After all, they were away from home and unable to celebrate the holiday with their family and loved ones because of the station's responsibilities."

Fourth master Wen stroke his beard and said, "That much is necessary, the station will not mistreat its staff especially if they have contributed to the station. Since this job is important and ran over the New Year, they would naturally be compensated for that as well."

Zhang Xiaohu was stunned and he thought to himself, "Goodness, what do these words mean?"

However, he replied respectfully, "Then I will thank fourth master Wen on behalf of the rest of our brothers."

Fourth master Wen waved his hands and said, "Haha, that is unnecessary. Additional compensation is natural."

He hesitated for a moment before asking, "How was the job, did it complete smoothly?"

Zhang Xiaohu was puzzled but he still replied, "Yes, it was quite normal. We did meet some mountain bandits but station head Luo handled them very efficiently."

However, he thought, "What is your purpose for calling me, fourth master? Are you looking for someone to accompany you because you are unable to sleep? I am feeling very tired now and would like to go to bed as soon as possible."

Fourth master Wen asked in a cordial tone, "So when did you return to the station."

Zhang Xiaohu wrinkled his brows and said, "Just a while ago, after I placed my belongings back into the room."

Fourth master Wen nodded and said, "Oh, then you must have not heard of the news yet."

"News?" Zhang Xiaohu asked in surprise, "What news?"

Fourth master Wen pondered for a moment and switched to a sympathetic

expression, “Zhang Xiaohu, I count you as part of my family and believed that it was fate that brought you to the station. I know that you are willing to sacrifice your youth, your passion, your effort, and even your life for the station.”

Zhang Xiaohu felt even more stunned as fourth master Wen continued, “I was like you in the past as well, and would not hesitate to give up myself for the station. Anyone can see that I have dedicated half my life for the station, this place is like my home and it has achieved its current accomplishments due to everyone’s combined efforts. If all of us did not think of sacrificing ourselves, the station will not be where it is today.”

Zhang Xiaohu was confused and he said carefully, “Have I done anything wrong recently? Please enlighten me on my shortcomings.”

Fourth master Wen smiled and said, “You have done well and not thrown my face.”

Zhang Xiaohu opened his mouth dumbly and asked, “Then why...?”

Fourth master Wen switched back to a sympathetic expression and said, “It’s like this. I have a devastating piece of news to relay to you, so I hope that you mentally prepare yourself for it. I think that you should adopt the horse stance and listen to me seriously. Also try to remain calm while I am speaking.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, “What news is it, fourth master, I have gotten dizzy from all your words.”

Fourth master Wen nodded and said, “Not bad, I have indeed chosen the right person, you are still able to remain calm as within my expectations.”

He continued, “Actually, I believe you already know this but as the saying goes, live well and die gloriously, some people may have died but he still lives within our hearts. Some people’s death can move mount Taishan, and some people’s death can only blow chicken feathers. As long as one has a fulfilled life, death will not be regrettable.”

Zhang Xiaohu heard fourth master Wen’s flowery and sad language and wondered what the other party was trying to say.

Suddenly, he felt that something bad had happened, was it his family?

Damn, did the Xicui mountain bandits regroup again? Or was it the Lu town bullies?

Zhang Xiaohu's mind became blank, what could he do then?

Fourth master Wen did not notice Zhang Xiaohu's unsteady expression under the darkness and he continued to speak, "It is easy to do good deeds, but difficult to do at least a single good deed each day, or a good deed that is impactful enough to influence other people for the rest of their lives. As the saying goes, do good deeds and avoid bad ones no matter how small they are, we should commend a good deed no matter how big or small it is, not to mention those that saved other people's life while risking his own. On behalf of Lotus escort, Huanxi mountain villa and Piaomiao sect, I toast my respect to you!"

After finishing his sentence, fourth master Wen wiped off the sweat on his forehead and said embarrassingly, "Sigh, scholar Fan's words are so difficult to remember, I have memorized it a few times yet am unable to recall them now. It's not entirely my fault either, I thought you would return sooner and did not expect you to be back a month later so I have not looked at the words for quite a while."

Sigh, this old fourth master had tried his best to memorize his speech over the winter but forgotten it at the most critical time!

When fourth master raised his head and saw Zhang Xiaohu's dark expression, he said in a hurt tone, "Zhang Xiaohu, I guess that you already know what I am trying to say. The dead may have departed but the survivors must try their best to live on, you have to turn your sorrow into strength and continue to work hard to take over your younger brother's baton and fulfil your younger brother's wishes. Continue to work hard for the sake of Lotus escort, and for the Piaomiao sect!"

Zhang Xiaohu's face became lively and his eyes widened, his mouth also opened large enough for a duck egg to be squeezed inside. He said in disbelief, "My younger brother? Zhang Xiaohua?"

Fourth master Wen nodded dejectedly, he said in his lowest voice, "That's right, it is your younger brother Zhang Xiaohua, the good employee in Huanxi

mountain villa, with the good image in Lotus escort, the good friend of Piaomiao sect, our hero, who will always live within our hearts!”

Zhang Xiaohu stood up and exclaimed, “This!!! Is there a mistake somewhere?!”

Fourth master Wen replied, “How could there be a mistake? Sit down, sit down first. I was praising you earlier on how composed you were, so how did you become so hot-blooded now? I know that it is hard to accept this news which is why I prepared such a long speech, so how can you still lose your cool and stand up while I am talking to you? Be more calm, you have to be as unmoving as a mountain so we can discuss on how to proceed with this matter.”

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and sat back onto his chair, he said, “Fourth master, I was quite surprised when I heard this news so I could not help but stand up, please forgive me.”

Fourth master stroked his beard and said, “Not bad, you have recovered very quickly just like how I would if I were you. I believe in your future potential!”

TL : Laughing my *** off.

Fourth master stood up from his seat and went to retrieve a wooden box. He placed it in front of Zhang Xiaohu and said, “Even though Zhang Xiaohua had already left us, we will still remember him dearly in our hearts. His heroic act must definitely be publicized but now is not the time, there are many things happening within Piaomiao sect so we cannot spread the news of him sacrificing his life for the villa master to outside. Hence, we can only prepare some condolence money on our side. This was given to me personally by Piaomiao sect’s sect master Ou to be passed to you, and it is a token of our respect towards Zhang Xiaohua.”

Zhang Xiaohu opened the wooden box in confusion, there was a thick wad of checks inside. On a closer inspection, there were at least a hundred checks, and the first check faced up was a check for one hundred taels, was there ten thousand taels worth of check inside the wooden box?

Zhang Xiaohu got a huge shock; he had never seen such a large amount of money since birth and was almost frightened to death upon seeing such a sum. He pushed away the wooden box and said, “Fourth master, what is this for?

What has happened to my younger brother, could someone have made a mistake? How do I dare to accept these hundred thousand taels without a clearer explanation?”

Fourth master Wen said, “I am unaware of the specifics since Huanxi mountain villa matters are rather secretive, but according to Qiu Tong, your younger brother was courageous and brave, and had given up his life in the process of protecting villa master Ou.”

“What?” Zhang Xiaohu was stunned, he asked in surprise, “How could there be such a thing? Why have I not heard of it? Xiaohua did not mention any of it to me!”

“To you?” Fourth master Wen smiled, “How could he inform you?”

Zhang Xiaohu replied solemnly, “Xiaohua is currently sleeping in my room, and he had followed the procession on our way back, everyone from the escort team knew this. However, he only said that he fell into the river during the night but did not mention all these.”

Fourth master Wen’s hand which was stroking his beard jerked involuntarily and pulled out some strands of his beard, causing him to stand up in pain. He looked at Zhang Xiaohu severely and asked, “Really? He is currently sleeping in your room?”

His demeanour was like a hundred and eighty about turn from his calm and collected expression from before.

Zhang Xiaohu replied, “That’s right, he is currently in my room sleeping very soundly.”

Fourth master Wen grabbed Zhang Xiaohu’s hands and said, “Go, hurry, let’s go over and show him to me.”

Zhang Xiaohu thought secretly as he was pulled up from his chair, “Cool down, cool down fourth master, you are a manager in the station after all.”

Chapter 143: Welcome

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Welcome

Fourth master Wen finally cooled down, he gripped onto Zhang Xiaohu's hand tightly, rushed over to the latter's room and when he saw Zhang Xiaohua sleeping soundly on the bed personally, he truly calmed down.

Fourth master Wen stroked the remainder of his beard and nodded his head, his smile was brilliant as he muttered, "Good, good, good."

His response made Zhang Xiaohu confused, the latter wondered if he was happy about Zhang Xiaohua's safety or the ten thousand taels he saved.

Upon thinking back to the thick wad of check, Zhang Xiaohu's eyes could not help but burn, it was a huge sum of money, how good would it be if it was his? However, as he looked over to Zhang Xiaohua's sweet sleeping expression, he felt that it was also another form of happiness which he was unwilling to exchange the money or even a mountain of gold for.

Fourth master Wen became motionless after his initial response and stood in his spot quietly.

Zhang Xiaohu did not understand the other party's intentions so he accompanied him and stood there as well.

After half a bell of time, fourth master Wen said in an annoyed tone, "Zhang Xiaohu, you shouldn't let me stand for so long."

Zhang Xiaohu became flustered and hurriedly pulled a stool over, he said, "Please sit, fourth master."

Fourth master Wen stomped his feet and said, "What do you think I meant? Would I want to sit on a cold stool in your room?"

Zhang Xiaohu did not understand the other party so he said, "Please wait, fourth master Wen, I will find a butt cushion for you."

Fourth master Wen flared up and said, "Seeing how oblivious you are, I doubt you can read your opponent's movements in a fight, not to mention improve your skills anymore."

Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly stepped forward and said, "Fourth master, what do you mean, aren't I working hard right now?"

Fourth master Wen scolded, "Since I am still waiting in your room, why haven't you called your younger brother up so I can question him?"

Zhang Xiaohu finally became enlightened as he thought secretly, "How would I know what you want if you don't say it explicitly? I am not a tapeworm in your stomach."

However, how would he dare to state his thoughts aloud, so he continued to smile and said, "Fourth master, it's not that I don't want to wake my younger brother. Unfortunately, it's extremely hard to wake him once he falls asleep, you can try it for yourself."

Fourth master Wen was stunned, he said, "I don't believe what you said."

After finishing his sentence, fourth master Wen walked to the front and nudged Zhang Xiaohua, he said to the latter's ears, "Zhang Xiaohua, Zhang Xiaohua."

Zhang Xiaohua's breathing was even and he continued to sleep.

Fourth master Wen pondered and activated qi in both his hands, he lifted Zhang Xiaohua up from the bed and shook him about. Zhang Xiaohua's stature was already small and when he was shaken by fourth master Wen in that manner, he looked just like a toy so Zhang Xiaohu had to control his laughter.

Upon seeing Zhang Xiaohua's unaffected response, fourth master Wen gave up and placed him back onto the bed, he returned a smile and said, "It seems that you're right, I have maligned you."

Zhang Xiaohu hurriedly replied, "I don't dare, I don't dare."

Fourth master Wen pondered again and said, "Since your younger brother has

safely returned, villa master Ou would definitely want to meet him at the soonest time possible. Tell him tomorrow morning not to go anywhere, people from the mountain villa will come over to fetch him back.”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded and said, “Alright, I understand, fourth master. I will look after him and not allow him to wander about.”

Fourth master Wen smiled and said, “Good, you can take a rest too. I will look for the guard; I can’t let him off for causing you to disturb my rest so I will instruct him to go to Huanxi mountain villa right now to pass a message.”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded but he did not dare to say anything else in fear of implicating himself.

When fourth master Wen walked to the door, he turned back and looked at Zhang Xiaohua who was sleeping as soundly as a pig, he said to himself in jealousy, “Such a happy face, it’s still better to be young. I will still choose to sleep as well as him even if you give me a thousand taels in exchange.”

After finishing his sentence, he turned around and left.

Zhang Xiaohu who was behind was still silent, he thought, “Fourth master-ah, why don’t you give me a thousand taels and I will exchange my sleep with yours.”

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua opened his eyes and studied his surroundings, he then realized that he was in the familiar room from where he nursed his injuries before. Just as he sat up on the bed, Zhang Xiaohu who was beside immediately felt his motion and got up quickly, he said, “Are you awake, Xiaohua?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “That’s right, second brother. Sleep more yourself, I can’t sleep anymore.”

Zhang Xiaohu was indeed tired and he lay back on the bed, he said, “Fourth master came over last night and said that he has already informed Huanxi mountain villa of your arrival, so someone will definitely come over this morning to fetch you back, and I should not let you wander about.”

Zhang Xiaohua asked upon hearing this, “Then do you know how villa master and the rest are doing now?”

When he spoke up to here, Zhang Xiaohu sat back up on the bed with a “hurgh”, stared at Zhang Xiaohua and asked, “Since you are on this matter, I have yet to ask you. Fourth master Wen said last night that you sacrificed your life to protect the villa master, and everyone thought that you had passed away. What did he mean by this? Why haven’t you told me earlier? You have to explain all this clearly to me by today.”

Zhang Xiaohua was stunned and he replied apologetically, “It’s a long story so I rather leave it for another time. Aren’t I doing well right now, I was also too lazy to explain it to you and was afraid that you would have worried unnecessarily.”

Zhang Xiaohu looked into Zhang Xiaohua’s eyes and said with a straight face, “Xiaohua, even if you did not tell me, wouldn’t I still worry when I find out about it later?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled forcedly and said, “I understand, second brother, I will definitely tell you about this in the future, alright?”

Zhang Xiaohu pondered and said, “Forget it, you have already grown up and have formed opinions of your own. Just do what you think is right, tell second brother if you want to or keep it to yourself if you don’t wish to tell me about it.”

Zhang Xiaohua said, “You are still my second brother no matter how much older I grow, so I will definitely find you if there is anything problem I am facing, so don’t worry about it. Oh right, the villa master should be fine from what you have said?”

Zhang Xiaohu pondered and said, “She should be, or fourth master Wen would have raised it up last night as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and said, “Then that is for the best. Alright, second brother, I shall go practice my martial arts so you can go back to sleep again.”

Zhang Xiaohu hopped out of the bed and said, “I shall follow you, I can’t get back to sleep now that I have talked to you.”

Thus, the two brothers walked one in front of the other towards the field in the escort station.

The carriages that returned the night before were still parked at the side of the field, and there were few people training since it was still early in the morning.

Zhang Xiaohua felt pleased when he saw this, even though he thought that his dipper heavenly fist was perfect, it was not a fist martial art that was passed down from elsewhere, so he would feel uneasy when other people watched him perform this martial art which he tailored specifically for himself.

Zhang Xiaohua found an empty spot and took up his position, he followed the routine of the dipper heavenly fist and began to execute each stance one after the other. Zhang Xiaohu was the same, he practiced the most familiar sixth fist from the beginning to its end, and after he was done, he sighed in delight, "As the saying goes, life is in exercise, this is no lie at all."

He turned his head and saw that Zhang Xiaohua was still practicing his fist martial art, and when he saw the stances that flowed smoothly from one to the next, he guessed that the latter's self-created martial art must have been completed. Unsurprisingly, he found six stances that had many similarities to the sixth fist and he thought secretly, "Xiaohua's martial art is so strange, it has been changed so much and yet can still be linked so flawlessly from one stance to the next, such a rare find indeed."

The stranger part was before Zhang Xiaohua finished his practice, Zhang Xiaohu found himself wondering how many fist martial art stances were incorporated into this martial art. When he observed carefully, he realized that Zhang Xiaohua was practicing the whole cycle again and again.

When the number of people in the field started to grow, Zhang Xiaohua finally completed nine cycles of his dipper heavenly fist and the warm sensation appeared in his body again and flowed throughout his body. Zhang Xiaohua then stopped his practice and when he saw his second brother watching him, he ran over to the latter's side.

Zhang Xiaohu saw his younger brother running towards him and asked in a confused tone, "Xiaohua, do you practice like this so diligently every day? How many times do you practice each session?"

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "Not many, just nine times, any more would be useless."

Zhang Xiaohu did not pay any particular attention and he commented, "As the saying goes, overworking is bad, you have to be mindful of yourself."

Zhang Xiaohua disagreed and said, "Sometimes I would practice nine sets of nine for a total for eighty-one times, what can this count as? My breathing is even and my face is not flushed so can't you tell that I am not worked up at all?"

Zhang Xiaohu wanted to persuade Zhang Xiaohua more but he thought back to the time he only practiced the sixth fist martial art when he would practice the same fist martial art over and over again, so he did not say anything else.

At that moment, there were many people in the field and as the two brothers walked slowly while in conversation, they heard a familiar voice just as they reached the courtyard entrance calling, "Zhang Xiaohua, it's really you."

Upon hearing the voice, Zhang Xiaohua turned back in surprise and called out, "Squad leader He, you're still alive?"

When Zhang Xiaohu turned around, he saw squad leader He Tianshu from the herb fields in Huanxi mountain villa running towards them.

He Tianshu's was full of joy as he ran towards the brother, but he frowned immediately upon hearing Zhang Xiaohua's words and said, "Zhang Xiaohua-ah, why can't I be alive since you are alive as well?"

Zhang Xiaohua's face flushed a deep red as he replied, "I have not seen you all for a long time and not heard of any news about you, so I naturally feel happy now that you are in front of me."

He Tianshu stroked Zhang Xiaohua's head lovingly, he smiled and said, "It's alright, Zhang Xiaohua, why would I mind?"

After finishing his sentence, he turned to Zhang Xiaohu and said, "Zhang Xiaohu, we have met before. I am He Tianshu from Huanxi mountain villa. The villa master was surprised when she received fourth master Wen's message yesterday and she instructed us to come over early in the morning to fetch Zhang Xiaohua back, do you....."

Zhang Xiaohu smiled and said, "Fourth master Wen had already informed me last night, you can bring him back to the mountain villa now."

He turned to Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Xiaohua, you have to be more mindful of your own safety in the future, and avoid situations where you think might be dangerous."

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, "I understand, second brother. Oh right, don't you want to know what happened as well? You can come over to the mountain villa with me since elder sister villa master will definitely want me to explain it to her."

Zhang Xiaohu pondered before shaking his head, he said, "Forget it, the escort team has only returned last night so there must still be many tasks to do today. We can talk about it later after I settled the matters over here."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised but he did not insist and bid Zhang Xiaohu farewell before following He Tianshu out of the escort station.

Zhang Xiaohu saw his younger brother slowly disappear before turning back towards his own room, he took out the five coins and pieces of silver from the money pouch and went to the bookkeeper's accounts room, passed the money to the sleepy-eyed bookkeeper before heading off for breakfast and joining the rest to unpack.

After Zhang Xiaohua followed He Tianshu out of the escort station, he saw a dull and large horse carriage on the other side of the street which was at least twice as large as the previous carriages he took before. Zhang Xiaohua was frozen on the spot, and at the same moment, the curtain of the carriage was raised by someone inside and a clear voice sounded, "Xiaohua, hurry and come up."

Zhang Xiaohua squinted, wasn't it Qiu Tong?

Zhang Xiaohua called out, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, you have come as well?" as he ran over to her.

When Zhang Xiaohua got on the carriage, He Tianshu followed right behind him.

Zhang Xiaohua's first sentence was, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, this carriage is really big."

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "That's right, this is the carriage used by the young mistress, but we took it out today specially to fetch our great benefactor."

He Tianshu also smiled as he said, "We could also take this carriage by basking in your glory."

Zhang Xiaohua felt slightly embarrassed, he said, "Its nothing, elder sister Qiu Tong. You all treat me well everyday so this was something I should have done."

He Tianshu shook his head and said, "Sigh, this is also what I should have done but was unable to do. Zhang Xiaohua, I am really at a loss on how to praise you, you have exceeded our expectations this time round."

Zhang Xiaohua responded modestly before continuing to ask, "Oh right, squad leader He, what shall we do in the future? I still would like to know how elder sister Ou is doing right now."

He Tianshu smiled and recounted the events that occurred after Zhang Xiaohua lost his consciousness in the river.

When Zhang Xiaohua learnt that Ou Yan was fine and the black clothed people did not pursue them, he patted his chest to show his relief while Qiu Tong smiled and said, "It is all thanks to you."

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he asked, "I was in the river, how could I be of any help?"

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "The black clothed people did not know that you fell into the river. You could kill their boss with just a thrust of your sword, and their boss was the most skilled expert in their midst, so they were naturally frightened of you and did not dare to pursue us any further."

Even though Zhang Xiaohua was still young, he knew his limitations so he said, "Elder sister Qiu Tong, you are speaking too highly of me. I think that those black clothed people were more afraid of the arriving reinforcements instead."

He Tianshu interrupted, "Forget it, everything has passed anyway and who knows what they were truly feeling then? That we are all back safe and sound is what that truly matters."

Zhang Xiaohua seemed to recall something as he asked, "Oh right, squad leader He, do you know who are the black clothed people?"

He Tianshu wrinkled his brows and said, "I am not sure, I have passed this matter to the disciplinary hall in our sect, but am unaware as of the specifics of the progress in their investigation."

Zhang Xiaohua nodded and did not spoke any further. Actually, he had a vague idea in his heart that since the other party had appeared to kill Ou Yan, they must have some confidence in either executing their mission or hiding their identities successfully.

Qiu Tong was still worried for Zhang Xiaohua's injuries so she could not help but ask about it.

Zhang Xiaohua smiled as he replied, "I was knocked unconscious by that elder and only woke up again after a ten days plus later. I am already healed fully by now, see, I even practiced a little of my fist martial art earlier."

Upon hearing this, Qiu Tong felt slightly more reassured but she said with still some lingering concerns in her heart, "We dispatched many people to look for you later on but to no avail, who knew that you would have reached the town that was close to the sea? Our estimations were too far off, and the young mistress kept on thinking that you might..."

Zhang Xiaohua opened his mouth and tried to explain but He Tianshu raised his hands and said, "Let's not talk about this now, the villa master will want to know about it as well later on. You can save yourself the trouble and explain to us at the same time."

Zhang Xiaohua said cheerfully, "Squad leader He's words sound right, elder sister Qiu Tong can listen later."

The horse carriage moved stealthily but quickly, and not long after, it reached the side door of Huanxi mountain villa. The number of guards at the door has increased and the inspection process was more careful, the passengers still had to be checked even though they were using the villa master's carriage before they were given passage.

The carriage entered the mountain villa and did not stop until they reached the courtyard where the party began the journey from before.

This place was close to the inner courtyard, and with Qiu Tong's lead, the three passed through several courtyards to the main hall in the inner courtyard.

There were no other people in the hall apart from elder Yu who was accompanying Ou Yan in a conversation. While Zhang Xiaohua was following Qiu

Tong to enter the hall, Ou Yan was looking outside continuously as though she was anxious to meet him again.

When Zhang Xiaohua entered the hall, elder Yu and Ou Yan both stood up. Ou Yan walked briskly towards Zhang Xiaohua, and how would he dare to let her come to him? He hurriedly walked over to her as well and called out, “Elder sister Ou, are you well?”

Ou Yan’s smile was like a blossoming flower as she looked towards Zhang Xiaohua and said, “I am doing well, Zhang Xiaohua, what about you? Let me see how serious the injuries on your body are.”

After finishing her sentence, she pulled Zhang Xiaohua’s hand and looked at his front and back. Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “They have recovered long ago, elder sister Ou, don’t worry, I still have a long life ahead of me.”

Upon hearing his reply, Ou Yan said, “Then that’s good, we were worrying about you all the time and wondering if you had...”

Like Qiu Tong, she did not finish her sentence.

Ou Yan let Zhang Xiaohua be seated before she asked him about the circumstances after his injury.

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a moment before recounting the events following his injuries, when he was saved and nursed back to health, searched for a way back and coincidentally met the people from Lotus escort including his second brother before following them back to Pingyang city.

However, he did not mention Master Jing Xuan and little Meng’s name, as well as the events in the mountain cave. Master Jing Xuan had reminded him time and again not to reveal her name, while the mountain cave was a chance encounter which he did not put much significance to, which is why he did not raise these matters up.

Everyone was tongue-tied after hearing Zhang Xiaohua’s experiences, Zhang Xiaohua’s encounters were wildly out of their expectations, he actually floated that far downstream and even met a family member at such a far off place. They were surprised because despite his severe injuries, Zhang Xiaohua was still able to hold on to his life as he floated that far downstream, and could still come back

fully recovered then.

Ou Yan and elder Yu initially wanted to ask more about master Jing Xuan but Zhang Xiaohua had already promised the latter not to reveal her identity, and she was also his benefactor so he was even more insistent to keep her secret.

Integrity is important in the Jianghu world, so everyone did not pursue the matter any further.

Elder Yu suddenly asked, “Zhang Xiaohua, can you let me see your small sword?”

Chapter 144: Accept disciple

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Reward

Zhang Xiaohua hesitated for a moment before pulling out his beloved small sword from his breast and passing it over to elder Yu.

Elder Yu extended his hand to receive it and wrinkled his brow immediately when he felt its weight. When he studied this seemingly normal looking small sword, he could not find anything special about it. He inserted his inner energy, but unfortunately, he did not have Li Jian's level of insight towards the sword and the small sword did not have any reaction to him, so it appeared to be a normal toy except for its weight.

Elder Yu shook his head as he looked at it closely again as though trying to solve some mystery in his head.

Zhang Xiaohua looked at elder Yu's actions helplessly before asking impatiently, "Elder Yu, are you planning on not returning it to me?"

Elder Yu glanced at Zhang Xiaohua, smiled and said, "That's right, this toy is pretty good to be able to pierce through the black clothed metal cocoon skill, of course I would want to keep it to play."

Zhang Xiaohua shrugged his shoulders and said helplessly, "Since elder Yu liked it so much, I would like to give it to you as well but sigh, unfortunately, I had nothing on me to repay my benefactor when I was rescued from the water so I gave this sword to her and it is impossible for me to give it to you now."

Elder Yu glared at Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Who are you teasing? I don't want this sword, stop playing about, I have no intention of taking away your possessions."

At that moment, Ou Yan walked up to them and asked curiously, “Is this the thing that killed the black clothed person?”

He Tianshu walked to the front as well and said, “That’s right, it is this small sword. The wound on the black clothed elder’s throat should be caused by it, and it is also the free gift I received when I bought my sword.”

Ou Yan wanted to take it as well to study it closely but elder Yu said, “Villa master should not hold it personally, this sword is pretty heavy despite its normal looking appearance. I will carry it for you while you inspect it.”

Ou Yan was agreeable and she peered at the sword before saying, “Even though my abilities are limited and I cannot practice martial arts, I have read many books. However, I still have not heard of such a mysterious sword before.”

When she stroked the sword from elder Yu’s extended hand, she became even more puzzled and said, “This sword obviously does not have a sharp edge so how is it able to pierce through a person’s body?”

He Tianshu said, “That’s what I was thinking of as well. I remembered that the small sword had no sharp edge when I gave it to Zhang Xiaohua.”

Elder Yu pondered and turned around to ask Zhang Xiaohua, “Are you sure you used this sword to kill the black clothed person?”

Zhang Xiaohua nodded his head helplessly.

Elder Yu casually handed the sword back to Zhang Xiaohua and said, “How about this, Zhang Xiaohua, why don’t you attack me with the sword like you did to the black clothed man.”

Zhang Xiaohua and the rest were surprised and they shouted in unison, “No way!”

Ou Yan said, “Elder Yu, is there a need to go so far? It is enough to know that this sword is responsible for the attack, there is no need to witness its prowess personally.”

Zhang Xiaohua also shook his head and said, “Elder Yu, not to mention that the atmosphere now is different from then, I have already forgotten how I executed the stance that day. Furthermore, I will not be able to bear the responsibility if I

hurt you accidentally.”

He Tianshu added, “Elder Yu, this might sound impolite but the black clothed elder’s metal cocoon skill is top-tiered even if his martial art skill is not comparable to yours, and Chang Ge’s sword was not enough to pierce through his defence. Do you think you could withstand Chang Ge’s sword without getting hurt?”

Elder Yu pondered for a moment and smiled bitterly, “Zhang Xiaohua’s sword stance was imparted to him by me, so I am naturally happy of his accomplishments. However, I really want to know how his sword stance’s prowess exceeded my expectations.”

Everyone continued to shake their heads and just at that moment, Qiu Tong interrupted, “How about this, elder Yu, we can let Zhang Xiaohua demonstrate the sword stance again but with half its power, there should not be much danger with this right?”

Apart from Zhang Xiaohua, everyone else revealed expressions of approval.

Actually, Zhang Xiaohua never expected to use the sword stance against another person while he was practicing it. The sensation also appeared only when he executed the movement at the required speed, and its prowess was something Zhang Xiaohua had experienced personally so he was certain that elder Yu would not be able to receive it safely.

However, he knew that elder Yu would definitely feel insulted if he said these, after all, he had only trained the sword stance for a few months so what rights did he have to brag so proudly to his teacher?

Another problem was pertaining to Qiu Tong’s suggestion, how was he able to reduce its power by half? His own left hand was already used to the required speed for the sensation to appear, and even if he reduced the force he put into the sword by half, its prowess would definitely not be halved as long as the flow appeared, and he was unwilling to let elder Yu risk the danger.

Zhang Xiaohua was about to object when his eyes suddenly brightened, he smiled and said, “Alright, I shall use half the force as elder sister Qiu Tong suggested for you to try and intercept. However, I shall say this in advance, even if this sword stance is not as powerful as you think, the other sword stances will

be similar in power as well.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Alright, then I shall try this sword stance.”

After finishing his sentence, elder Yu left the hall first while everyone else followed behind, and only Zhang Xiaohua had a bitter face as he walked at the back.

There was a spacious little field in the middle of the courtyard.

Elder Yu and Zhang Xiaohua stood facing each other in the field, and Zhang Xiaohua asked, “Elder Yu, I shall begin if you are ready.”

Elder Yu smiled and said, “Alright, you can begin now, I am ready.”

Zhang Xiaohua was still worried and he asked again, “Elder Yu, are you sure you don’t want to consider again if we should do this?”

Elder Yu mock scolded, “Little rascal, just show your hand. The sword stance was taught by me so what is there for me to be afraid of?”

Upon hearing this, Zhang Xiaohua switched the sword to his right hand and shouted, “I’m coming.” His right hand gripped onto the sword as he executed the sword stance he used to kill the black clothed elder, and the small sword was like a meteor from a hidden corner as it shot towards elder Yu’s throat.

The fact was that the sword stance was powerful, and He Tianshu who was watching aside was surprised as he had never seen Zhang Xiaohua practiced the sword before. Now that he watched Zhang Xiaohua’s demonstration, he realized that the sword stance appeared very practiced as its angle, force and grip were flawless, and he could not help but feel worried for elder Yu.

However, elder Yu’s smile remained on his face. What a joke, the sword stance was imparted to Zhang Xiaohua by him so all its variations, angles and movements were familiar to him, so he naturally began his counter before the sword stance got close to him.

When the small sword was in front of his eyes, elder Yu extended his unarmed hand forwards and caught Zhang Xiaohua’s wrist. If it was a real fight with an enemy, Zhang Xiaohua would definitely struggle but at that moment, he naturally stopped and looked at elder Yu while awaiting for further instructions.

Elder Yu was slightly disappointed as he said, “Just this stance? It is pretty normal.”

Zhang Xiaohua replied, “I am sure that I used this stance that day.”

Elder Yu looked over at the other people. He Tianshu was faraway that night so he was uncertain, and as for Ou Yan and Qiu Tong, they were flustered from the danger that night so how could they notice these things?

Seeing that the rest were unsure, elder Yu released his grip and said, “Then try using other sword stances on me.”

Zhang Xiaohua helplessly raised his small sword again and demonstrated the other sword variations, but the result remained the same, and he was caught by elder Yu’s only arm again.

Elder Yu was still unsatisfied so he asked, “What if you used your full strength?”

Everyone objected again when they heard this, but Zhang Xiaohua thought secretly, “Even if I used my left hand and full strength, you would still be able to intercept it.”

Elder Yu said in an annoyed tone, “We would not know how powerful this sword is if you do not use your full strength.”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “Isn’t that easy? Just strike any large tree in the courtyard to find that out.”

Elder Yu laughed, “Haha, He Tianshu is right, I am being too obstinate. Let’s see you demonstrate on a tree.”

At the corner of the courtyard was a tree as wide as two people could hug. Elder Yu walked over to the tree and smiled at Ou Yan, he said, “Villa master, can we use this tree for our experiment?”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “It is okay to try as long as you don’t kill it.”

Elder Yu turned to Zhang Xiaohua and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, use your full strength to strike this tree.”

Zhang Xiaohua was unhappy as he thought, “A tree is still a life form, why are you so heartless towards them? I can’t even bear to hurt the flowers or grass

while practicing yet you are instructing me to do something this bad right now.”

Zhang Xiaohua walked to under the tree and used the same sword variation with his full strength to pierce the large tree. Zhang Xiaohua’s five hundred jin strength in each arm was not for naught as a “Phuahh” sound echoed out and the metal rod like small sword bore a three to four cun hole into it.

Even though the result was quite impressive, elder Yu was still unsatisfied as a sword with a sharp edge is also able to produce such a result, yet Chang Ge’s sword was unable to penetrate the black clothed elder’s metal cocoon.

Hence, he asked again for Zhang Xiaohua’s sword and used it personally to attack the tree. With a “Phuu” sound, the sword struck into the tree about as deep as the length of the sword, and it seemed no different from a metal rod.

Elder Yu retrieved the small sword and looked at the hole made in the tree. He was wordless for a moment before turning towards Zhang Xiaohua and said, “Zhang Xiaohua, your strength is quite impressive, the hole I made is not as deep as yours.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s mouth curved into a smile as he said, “I do not dare to accept your compliment, elder Yu, it’s just that I am still young.”

After trying for a few more times with not satisfactory outcome, everyone came to the conclusion that Zhang Xiaohua’s success in killing the black clothed elder was due to the latter’s carelessness.

The black clothed elder must have slighted Zhang Xiaohua’s small sword which had no sharp edge and assumed that the latter had no martial arts background so he did not use his full strength to guard his attack. When his palm was pierced, he realized that Zhang Xiaohua had superhuman strength, but it was already too late as Zhang Xiaohua broke through his metal cocoon to pierce his throat, causing his death.

After some consideration, this was the conclusion that everyone came to, and why so? Who wouldn’t agree if they saw the indignant expression on the black clothed elder’s face?

Carelessness can cause death.

A minor detail led to the reversal of the situation.

Since everyone came to this conclusion, they no longer continued to discuss on the topic and returned back to the main hall. Elder Yu returned the small sword back to Zhang Xiaohua who kept it carefully into his breast and specially sat in a further distance away from the former.

Everyone began to chat idly again when Zhang Xiaohua suddenly thought of something and asked Ou Yan, "Elder sister Ou, can I ask you something?"

Ou Yan replied curiously, "What is it, Xiaohua, just say it freely."

"We, when we left the villa for such a long time, is there an allowance for that?" Zhang Xiaohua asked sheepishly, "Or is there any pay or compensation for the period while I was injured and away?"

Ou Yan was surprised as she exchanged glances with Qiu Tong before saying, "Xiaohua, what do you mean by this? Can you explain it more clearly?"

Zhang Xiaohua's face turned red as he recounted how station head Luo requested Zhang Xiaohu to separate his living expenses, and Ou Yan's face turned white and was about to speak up when Qiu Tong hurriedly interrupted, "Young mistress, don't be angry. Leave this matter to me, I will go to the escort station and talk to fourth elder Wen about this later."

Ou Yan took a deep breath and replied, "Alright, I am reassured if you are handling this."

She smiled towards Zhang Xiaohua and said, "Xiaohua, you don't need to worry about this matter, we will handle it for you."

Zhang Xiaohua then sighed in relief, he said, "My second brother's pay is already not much, so his job might be fruitless if he has to pay for my living expenses as well."

Gosh... had Zhang Xiaohua forgotten about the dump of money pouches?!

When Ou Yan heard his words, she thought of something and said to Zhang Xiaohua, "Xiaohua, wait for a moment."

After finishing her sentence, she went out and not long later, she returned with a small wooden box and passed it to Zhang Xiaohua. She said, "Zhang Xiaohua, I prepared this for you a while ago, so I shall give it to you now that you

have returned.”

Zhang Xiaohua was surprised, he hesitated for a moment before accepting it and opened it casually. In the next moment, he became as surprised as Zhang Xiaohu from the previous night and exclaimed in shock, “Elder sister Ou, why is there so many checks? Are they for me?”

Everyone burst into laughter when they saw Zhang Xiaohua’s shocked expression. Qiu Tong explained, “This is your prize for sacrificing your life. Our Piaomiao sect’s sect master personally instructed for this to be prepared and it was actually supposed to be three hundred taels, but sect master Ou said that it was too little and added five thousand taels to the sum. Our young mistress still felt that it was too little so she took out another five thousand taels from the mountain villa and was about to give it to your family.”

Zhang Xiaohua looked at the checks blankly, he blinked and said, “I have never expected myself to be able to earn so much money. If you stack all the money together, it might be taller and heavier than me.”

Everyone laughed as they said, “That is of course!”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered before closing the wooden box and passing it back to Ou Yan, he said, “Elder sister Ou, you treat me so well just like my elder sister Qing, so sacrificing myself when you are in danger is no different from protecting my family to me. Moreover, my life is still ‘preserved’ so I definitely cannot accept this money.”

Zhang Xiaohua’s reaction exceeded Ou Yan’s expectations and she asked in disbelief, “Xiaohua, there is ten thousand taels here, are you sure you don’t want it?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “Elder sister Ou, to be honest, not to mention ten thousand taels, I have not even seen a hundred taels of money before. This is the money you prepared when you thought I passed away, but I am alright now so I naturally cannot accept it.”

Ou Yan pondered and said, “How about this, since you saved my life after all, and your elder sister Ou’s life is very precious and worth far more than these money, why don’t you treat this money as a thank you gift?”

Zhang Xiaohua continued to reject, he said, “Elder sister Ou, haven’t I said this before? Saving you is like saving a family member to me, so do you think I will ask for money from my own family?”

The two tugged and pushed like this for half the day until Zhang Xiaohua helplessly opened the wooden box and said, “Elder sister Ou, I will accept your kindness then.”

After finishing his sentence, he took out a check that was worth a hundred taels and kept it in his breast. He said, “This hundred taels of money is worth the same as ten thousand taels of elder sister’s sincerity to me, so keeping this hundred taels is equivalent to accepting elder sister’s ten thousand taels worth of sincerity, what do you think?”

Ou Yan’s eyes brightened and she giggled, “Xiaohua, you have many little smarts about you. Alright, elder sister won’t force you in that case, but remember that you said you consider me as part of your family so I am going to treat you like my own family as well, and I hope you treat me like your elder sister as well.”

Zhang Xiaohua became overjoyed when he heard this, he said, “Elder sister Ou, I have nothing more to ask for with an elder sister like you.”

Ou Yan rolled her eyes upon hearing this, she smiled and said, “As long as you know this.”

She turned to Qiu Tong and said, “Go to the accounts room in the mountain villa, Xiaohua’s monthly pay...”

Ou Yan pondered for a moment but she did not say any actual sum. Qiu Tong understood that Ou Yan was unaware of the payroll of the mountain villa so she smiled and said, “Young mistress does not have to worry about this. As long as Xiaohua works in our mountain villa, he will not be short-changed in the future. I propose that we give him three taels each month for now since his food and accommodation expenses are all covered by the mountain villa, and it would not be good if he gives too much money to his family.”

Zhang Xiaohua was naturally overjoyed when he heard that his pay had increased by ten times, and Ou Yan was also pleased when she saw the happiness on Zhang Xiaohua’s expression. She said to Zhang Xiaohua, “Xiaohua,

what do you like to do in the mountain villa in the future? We can let Qiu Tong arrange this for you.”

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a while before saying, “I should better stick with squad leader He. Not only can I learn fist martial arts, I can learn to plant different types of herbs and even help elder sister solve difficult problems.”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “I shall let you be then since Xiaohua still wants to help elder sister solve this problem”

She said to He Tianshu, “I will have to trouble squad leader He in the future to look after Xiaohua. His work should not be too strenuous, and you can let him read whatever he wants to read and practice whatever martial arts he wants to learn, what do you think?”

He Tianshu smiled and said, “I agree with villa master, Zhang Xiaohua is a good child who does not require much effort for me to look after.”

Everyone’s praises caused Zhang Xiaohua to feel uncomfortable, he scratched his head and said helplessly, “Am I really that fool? Why don’t I feel it at all?”

His stomach growled loudly while he was in the middle of his sentence.

Zhang Xiaohua’s face flushed again and he said, “Elder sister Ou, is there still any breakfast after talking for the whole morning? I have not eaten the food in the mountain villa for some time and am missing it now.”

Everyone laughed.

Chapter 145: Reward

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

Accept disciple

Piaomiao sect, on Piaomiao mountain villa, within the discussion hall. Ou Peng was trying some quality tea leisurely.

It was a rare opportunity for him to have some idle time in his hands so he was currently enjoying the moment.

The previous events had caused him to feel strenuous and tired.

Luoshui sect recently joined Piaomiao sect and their plans for the new year on how to advance from there required the Piaomiao six tigers and Shui Yupeng to squeeze their bran juices. They finally set five “three-year advancement plans” which were subjected to external factors. By expanding so rapidly, not only would one’s foundation not be stable, they would catch the attention of the mega sects like a tall tree that catches the higher winds. Furthermore, if the sects do not deepen their relationships and continue on their own paths for advancement, not only will they let down their brothers who gave up their lives for this acquisition, it would alienate the brothers from the Luoshui sect which would cause more strife between the sects in the future. This point was something Ou Peng had experienced personally and Shui Yupeng would naturally want to avoid, so for this period of time, matters would be handled in moderation and harmonious development would be placed as priority.

Whether Luoshui sect’s “three-year advancement plans” or Piaomiao sect’s amended “Five-year plan”, the main idea of both was to raise the Piaomiao sect’s position in Jianghu and increase their sphere of influence until they could be on the same level as the other major powers. The feasibility of these goals depended on Piaomiao sect and Luoshui sect’s might, and increasing one’s might

would naturally encroach on the martial arts skill level of their members. Hence, the herbs from the secret area was the most important aid to realizing their dream, which is why for this year's expedition to the secret area, Ou Peng held much deeper hope and higher expectations for it.

After finishing the overarching goals for Piaomiao sect, many disciples including Lu Yueming who previously went to the secret area were dispatched after the New Year and after they left, Ou Peng could only wait in the sect for their results. Unlike the previous time when he did not put much attention to the mission, he carried more hopes as it concerned the expansion of the Piaomiao sect's advancement. Ou Peng could not help but worry, and he would wonder if he should send the other six tigers of Piaomiao out personally at well.

However, Ou Peng who had experienced the conflicts and vicissitudes in the Jianghu world was well aware that his disappearance would attract the attention of many other sects including the mega sects. Even if the mission was a success and he managed to obtain the herbs from the secret area, the location of the secret area would be exposed and the rewards inside could no longer be split among the four factions. In comparison, it was better to work under the covers and appoint a disciple to handle the matter.

However, Ou Peng had to endure several days of anticipation and worry when conducting a secretive operation and the enormous pressure he felt had to be kept to himself, so the burden was extremely large. A few months ago on a particular night, Lu Yueming hurried on a carriage and came back alone to report on the status of his mission, and Ou Peng was so agitated that he almost activated the Piaomiao steps to receive him upon learning of his arrival. Now that he thought about it, his actions were quite embarrassing and not appropriate of his age, but it was also difficult for him to maintain his composure from such a large stimulation.

His agitation and loss of composure led Shui Yupeng who was present at that time to be surprised at the new side of his sect master, but as the saying goes, the ignorant would not understand.

Lu Yueming's efforts were not wasted as the pharmacy hall people would not let others work for nothing. A few days before he left, the Qi improving pills were finally completed and it was a batch of pills that could be reproduced in the

future. If nothing out of the ordinary happened, it would be possible to nurture a new batch of core disciples, and Piaomiao sect's might would increase by another level again.

However, Ou Peng realized that there was another problem, should he share the pills with Shui Yupeng and the disciples from the Luoshui sect? If he let them consume these pills, it might become harder to keep their existence a secret but if they were not given a share, it would lead the two sects to diverge more in power. Hence, whether or not he should share the pills was another problem for him to consider carefully.

Fortunately, all problems have their solutions and even the east wind can be stopped. When his other fellow disciple brothers meet up again to discuss, they would come to a solution at then as well.

These two matters were official problems of the sect, and as the highest positioned decision maker of the sect, Ou Peng naturally had the responsibility to make the best decision for them. And as an elder brother, he was most affected by the recent events that his younger sister encountered.

The investigation of the assault on the rainy night still had no leads, and the disciples in the disciplinary hall were helpless in the situation. Even though Piaomiao sect was not top-tiered, it was still a reputable sect so not being able to counter despite receiving such a provocation was a humiliation to them. Fortunately, the matter of Ou Yan's attack was kept tightly under wraps so most of Jianghu was still unaware of it or Piaomiao sect would lose its face.

With a younger sister who could not practice martial arts and had no ability to defend herself, he had always paid special attention to her safety. However, such a huge accident had occurred from a slight oversight. Fortunately, Ou Yan managed to escape with her life and even though she sustained severe injuries, it was not life-threatening. According to the news from Huanxi mountain villa, Ou Yan's health had mostly recovered, and this news made Ou Peng happier than any other news he had received recently, but when he thought back to his younger sister's personality, Ou Peng would shake his head. Even without mentioning the matter of going south, he had advised her to take more retainers but she insisted that she had no value in Jianghu and it was sufficient to hide the news of her trip. All would be good if nothing happened, but such a large

accident actually occurred. Even though there was this lad surnamed Zhang who sacrificed himself to save her life, he took out three hundred taels from the Piaomiao sect treasury but his younger sister complained that it was too little so he added five thousand taels to the sum. There was no precedence for such a case, but who asked him to save the Piaomiao sect's sect master's precious younger sister? If anyone was unhappy about the matter, he could still salvage some reason but Ou Yan actually doubled the sum before it was sent to the elder brother who was in Lotus escort, so the total amount added up to ten thousand taels! With such a precedence, how could he offer condolence money in the future?

Ou Peng shook his head as he smiled bitterly, his younger sister was a passionate person who would see the best in everyone, but how could he blame her since the two siblings had also received much kindness from other people in order to reach where they were today. If these ten thousand taels could be exchanged for Ou Yan's life, what would cause him to hesitate? Nothing, because he was willing to exchange even the entire Jianghu for her.

When he thought up to here, Ou Peng shook his head and drank some tea. Funny, which handsome and righteous hero would have the fortune to take her heart? Ou Yan was no longer young so as her older brother, he should place on concern on the matter.

While he was in the midst of these thoughts, he suddenly felt soft footsteps heading towards the discussion hall. Speak of the devil, this person had come at an opportune time.

When the visitor arrived, it was indeed Huanxi mountain villa's villa master Ou Yan!

Speaking of this discussion hall, apart from Ou Yan who could enter without reporting her identity, no one else was allowed to enter even if it was Ou Peng's wife. Of course, his family would not visit often as well. Now that he saw his younger sister, his love for her did not decrease despite the passing of time.

Ou Yan was also surprised when she entered. When she entered the discussion hall in the past, there would always be people to announce her but it was exceptionally quiet this time. She never expected to see her elder brother

drinking tea idly by himself, Ou Yan could not help but smile. She increased her pace and greeted Ou Peng. Ou Peng smiled and said, "There is no one else here so just sit casually."

Ou Yan smiled and seated herself while looking lovely as she did.

Ou Peng looked lovingly towards his younger sister and asked, "Yan'er, how is your health recently?"

Ou Yan replied, "Look at what elder brother is suggesting. Even though my body is not suitable to practice martial arts, it has still weathered across time and is not as weak and fragile as you think. My previous illness has already subsided under the supervision of the physician so I am feeling well right now."

Ou Peng still said, "Yan'er, honestly, I hope you do not do such stubborn things in the future. If you ever need to leave again, bring more bodyguards along with you at least. Your elder brother was almost worried to death when you encountered so much danger, I do not know what to do if something like this happens again."

Ou Yan said teasingly, "Alright, elder brother, I will be more careful next time. This time was indeed out of my expectations and I am still unable to figure the cause of the accident even up till today. Do you have any leads on your end?"

Ou Peng replied embarrassingly, "Sigh, not yet. I will prompt them to investigate more carefully and raise justice for you sooner."

Ou Yan said, "There is no need to hurry, I am okay if there is any malicious plot targeting me. More importantly, elder brother must be careful of any plots towards you and Piaomiao sect, and remember to bring bodyguards along with you whenever you go out."

Ou Peng smiled and said, "Alright, I will definitely bring Shi Niu as my sturdy bodyguard. Oh right, Yan'er, why did you come over today? It can't be to chase me for the perpetrator right?"

Ou Yan replied, "Not that, elder brother, I am handling the matter of finding the perpetrator to you. I came over this time for another matter."

Ou Peng asked in a curious tone, "What matter is it? For us to discuss about it?"

Ou Yan said, “Elder brother, do you still remember the youth who saved my life?”

Ou Peng replied, “I do, his is called Zhang something right? About this matter, I would still like to remind you not to be so stubborn. Our sect has its rules and the amount of condolence money to be given is already defined. While it is fine to give slightly more, you have added such a large sum that it has become inappropriate. Fortunately, not many people know of this so there should not be too much concern or the consequences will be undesirable. How are you going to find a husband just based on your stubbornness?”

After listening to these words, Ou Yan lost her temper and scolded, “Elder brother... Why are you always nagging about this, am I stubborn? What does that have to do with finding a husband!”

Ou Peng hurriedly raised his hands and said, “Nothing, both matters have nothing to do with each other. Elder brother has gotten old and is prone to nagging, you can just ignore me if you like. Oh right, haven’t the condolence money been passed to the elder brother, you can save your nagging tonight. Even if I had not met you for a while, I can still guess what you are thinking of.”

When he spoke up to here, Ou Yan’s expression turned to one of joy, she smiled and said, “Elder brother, I have come today precisely to discuss about this with you. You can save the ten thousand taels and your worry about bending the rules, and no one else will complain about this matter anymore.”

Ou Peng was surprised, he asked, “Why?”

Realization dawned on him and he said, “Oh, have you found the boy?”

Ou Yan said in surprise, “Elder brother, you are awesome to guess this right away.”

Ou Peng shook his head and said smilingly, “How could such a little riddle stump this sect master?”

Ou Yan smiled as well, she said, “We did not find him ourselves, but he came back on his own.”

Ou Peng was more surprised this time, he said, “He did not perish despite being struck by the black clothed elder’s palm thrust but must have at least

suffered some serious injuries. Since he could return by himself, I believe his injuries have more or less healed?”

Ou Yan was also stunned and she asked, “Elder brother, how did you know that he has recovered?”

Ou Peng smiled as he replied, “That is normal, how could he travel a thousand li and return to Pingyang city if he had not recovered?”

Ou Yan reflected for a while before nodding slightly in agreement.

She repeated what Zhang Xiaohua recounted earlier that day in whole to Ou Peng, while the latter listened in shock. Such occurrence was rarely seen, even surviving and coming back safely to Pingyang city was a miracle by itself.

Ou Peng asked, “What is that Zhang something’s name?”

Ou Yan replied, “Zhang Xiaohua.”

Ou Peng smiled, “Haha, Zhang Xiaohua, such a fun name for a boy, it sounds like a girl’s name. Oh right, since this Zhang Xiaohua has returned, you would definitely insist on giving him the condolence money, so why did you say that it is unnecessary?”

Ou Yan replied, “Elder brother has guessed correctly, but you only guessed what happened at the beginning and not at the end. Zhang Xiaohua rejected this ten thousand taels and only took a piece of hundred taels check after much persuasion. He even said that the hundred taels were ‘like ten thousand taels worth of my sincerity, so keeping the hundred tales were equivalent to accepting my enormous sincerity.’ Elder brother, don’t you think that this boy is very interesting?”

Ou Peng rubbed his chin and said thoughtfully, “Mm, you’re right, this Zhang Xiaohua is quite interesting. So what is your intention for coming today?”

Ou Yan replied, “It’s like this, elder brother. Actually while we were on the journey down south, I saw Zhang Xiaohua practice martial arts very diligently and even thought his aptitude was rather normal, his perseverance was at the top and it reminded me of you in the past. Hence, I promised him then after we returned from the trip, I would request a favour from you to allow He Tianshu from the pharmacy hall to impart our Piaomiao sect inner energy cultivation

method to him.”

Ou Peng nodded slightly upon hearing this, he said, “If you feel this way, it should be fine. Since you said that his aptitude is normal, we can just let He Tianshu teach him some inner energy cultivation method, and I guess it should be enough for him to practice for life.”

Ou Yan continued, “But he rejected this ten thousand taels which I am still unhappy about, after all, how would I come back safely if not for him? I must return this kindness and since he is uninterested in money, I wonder if we could do it like this. Elder brother, can you allow him to join the Piaomiao sect and become a disciple here? Such is precisely a wish of Zhang Xiaohua.”

Ou Peng laughed loudly when he heard this, he said, “And I was wondering if it was some large matter that required us siblings to discuss so seriously. When Piaomiao sect recruits’ disciples, although we have strict requirements that this Zhang Xiaohua would definitely not satisfy, since Yan’er has spoken, how can I as the elder brother reject her request? Not to mention one, so what if there were ten people? Why is there a need to discuss such a small matter?”

Sigh, it is truly that people are the greatest cause of grievances. When Zhang Xiaohua left Guo village, he tried all sorts of matters to become a Piaomiao sect disciple but his wish could not be fulfilled no matter how hard he tried. Instead, he tried for Lotus escort but the escort station also denied him. As for being a Piaomiao sect disciple? He had long given up on that wish.

But now, with one sentence from Ou Yan, Ou Peng readily agreed without even considering Zhang Xiaohua’s aptitude or age. With just a simple nod of his head, he fulfilled Zhang Xiaohua’s greatest wish and even said that it was a small matter that did not require much consideration. As the saying goes, connections are important!

Upon hearing the good news, Ou Yan said, “Then I will have to trouble elder brother. Actually, I know that elder brother is concerned with aptitude when he accepts new disciples into Piaomiao sect, and Zhang Xiaohua’s aptitude is vastly inferior to those you have accepted, so I have caused you much trouble.”

Ou Peng wringed his sleeves and said, “What is there to be courteous about with your elder brother? Even though aptitude is important, perseverance is

necessary as well. Even if Zhang Xiaohua has average talent, Piaomiao sect has so many disciples so one disciple should not make much difference. Why not let He Tianshu be his master and teach him at Huanxi mountain villa, what do you think?”

Ou Yan replied enthusiastically, “That’s a good idea. Zhang Xiaohua’s aptitude is only average, no, it should be very poor since I remembered He Tianshu ever saying that he had practiced for a long time but cannot even learn a complete fist martial art, but he is very bright when it comes to herbs and could understand the books I have lent him, so perhaps he might become useful over at my side.”

Ou Peng said, “Let’s do it this way then. You can bring He Tianshu and Zhang Xiaohua over to the discussion room tomorrow to talk about this issue. Also, the problem of the herbs can be solved slowly, the elders in the pharmacy hall are all helpless so you don’t have to worry too much about it and let it affect your health.”

Ou Yan replied, “I understand, elder brother, I will still want to follow up on this case even if they are unable to solve it. Even though there will be some supply from the secret area, it can’t be as convenient as having our own grown ones. If we can only enter the secret area once a year, the supply would never match up to the demand of the sect. Hence, this idea cannot be given up if elder brother wants to let the Piaomiao sect flourish in the future.”

Ou Peng sighed and said, “I know that you will not be willing to rest this case, but remember to take care of your health first and foremost.”

Ou Yan smiled and said, “I understand, elder brother, so stop nagging please.”

The siblings continued to chat for some while, and Ou Yan departed to return back to Huanxi mountain villa later on.

Chapter 146: Complain

Translator : Casualtranslator

Enjoy

#1 : Hi guys, I am planning to take about a 1-2 weeks worth of break after this. Thinking of doing something different for work, and other stuff. BTW good news is that with this chapter the first book 0 is completed and next chapter onwards will be from book 1.

#2 : About MT, the translator aka Essencexn went to summer camp so it is hard for her to translate as of now. May be in a week or two MT will be resumed.

Complain

After Zhang Xiaohua returned to Huanxi mountain villa, his life returned to the habit in the past. He initially thought that after being away for so long, little second Nie and the rest would surround him to inquire on his whereabouts so he already prepared a huge dump of lies to feed them with. However, reality was not the case and when everyone saw him return, their eyes revealed their surprise but their words were simple questions of concern. Zhang Xiaohua felt strange as though he had used a fist to hammer onto soft cotton, but at the same time, he felt admiration that these reputable sect disciples had such upright personalities!

Just as Zhang Xiaohua was about to throw away all the lies he had stored in his head, a group of flies buzzed around him in the night with Ma Jing as their leader. During the previous time when Zhang Xiaohua got injured, he returned with a higher position and was subjected to their ridicule and bullying, but now that he returned after disappearing for so long, everyone assumed that he had already departed for eternity. Since Zhang Xiaohua reappeared again, how could

they not be surprised and curious?

Hence, they were like flies that drawn to rubbish as they buzzed around Zhang Xiaohua all day to ask the latter on the happenings for the past two months. Zhang Xiaohua initially wanted to ignore them but he was too gracious to let them down, so after some inquiries, he recounted the batch of lies he initially prepared for little second Nie until Ma Jing and the rest were full from their gossip. Finally, they dispersed and left Zhang Xiaohua alone, while Zhang Xiaohua rubbed his nose helplessly and thought, “nose-ah, nose, please don’t blame me. It is not that I don’t care about you, but I was forced to do this. People in Jianghu do not belong to themselves.”

In the morning of the next day, Zhang Xiaohua was still unaware of the big biscuit which dropped from the sky and he continued his three main activities as in the past – practice martial arts, eat, and work in the fields. Even though Ou Yan has instructed that his time was free for him to spend and he did not have to work in the fields anymore, he had already gotten used to the work there and would feel reluctant to leave the fields. Furthermore, spring was coming so there was more work to do like weeding and watering, so Zhang Xiaohua was more than happy to lend a helping hand. At that moment, he was striking the little hoe onto the ground when he heard someone call his name from the side.

When he raised his head, he saw two people standing beside the field. They were He Tianshu and Qiu Tong. He smiled and went over to greet them, “Elder sister Qiu Tong, why have you come?”

Qiu Tong smiled back and replied, “Xiaohua, you sure are busy. Hasn’t the young mistress said that you are free to do whatever you like, why are you still working in the fields?”

Zhang Xiaohua smiled and said, “I have grown up in the fields and have gotten accustomed to it, so it is better if I come over to help.”

Qiu Tong said, “In that case, squad leader He can save on finding more help. Zhang Xiaohua, come over quickly, young mistress is looking for squad leader He and you to discuss about some matters.”

He Tianshu who was at a side asked in a puzzled tone, “Me as well? What matter is it?”

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "About this, I am pretty clueless myself. The young mistress was acting all mysterious and she refused to say anything else."

Zhang Xiaohua said, "Alright, I will be up right away."

After finishing his sentence, Zhang Xiaohua tidied himself up and followed Qiu Tong and He Tianshu to the inner courtyard. Qiu Tong pointed to the door and said, "The two of you can enter by yourself, our young mistress is waiting for you in there. I still have other things to do so I won't be accompanying you."

He Tianshu said, "Alright, go off with your work then. It is not our first time here anyway."

He led Zhang Xiaohua in after finishing his sentence, but Qiu Tong called out to Zhang Xiaohua and asked, "Zhang Xiaohua, I am going over to Lotus escort for a while. Is there anything you would like me to do or a message you wish to pass on to your brother?"

Zhang Xiaohua pondered for a while before replying, "There's nothing much, you can tell my elder brother that I am doing well so he doesn't have to worry."

Qiu Tong nodded her head and left hurriedly.

Zhang Xiaohua followed He Tianshu into the main hall within the inner courtyard.

Ou Yan was sitting on a chair inside the main hall looking slightly anxious, she smiled when she saw the two arrived and said, "Both of you finally came, what took you so long?"

Zhang Xiaohua answered somewhat apologetically, "Elder sister Ou, I was working in the fields so it took me more time to get ready, sorry to keep you waiting."

Ou Yan's expression changed immediately when she heard this, she smiled and said, "It's fine, how can I blame you if you are still so humble and diligent? Come, the two of you follow me to somewhere, there is something that needs to be settled."

Zhang Xiaohua and He Tianshu both felt strange when Ou Yan did not explain her purpose of calling them and they exchanged glances before following behind

Ou Yan to leave the main hall.

Pingyang city, Lotus escort, within fourth master Wen's room. Fourth master Wen and his nephew Yu Deyi were drinking some fragrant tea while chatting idly when someone hurriedly entered the courtyard to the front of the door.

Hearing the footsteps, fourth master Wen raised his head to see the visitor, it was station head Luo.

Fourth master Wen involuntarily wrinkled his brows when he saw the visitor but he changed to a slight smile and said, "So it's station head Luo, come in quickly."

Station head Luo smiled as he walked into the room, the two parties exchanged greetings before sitting down. Fourth master Wen said, "Station head Luo-ah, it has been hard on you recently. This success of this recent long job is all thanks to you, I shall remember your contribution this time and will mention it in front of the overall station head in the future."

Station head Luo hurriedly stood, smiled and said, "It's nothing, all this is part of my responsibility and due to fourth master's usual guidance."

Fourth master Wen smiled and said, "Station head Luo is so funny, this is obviously due to your merit and I have only moved my mouth a little on usual days."

Station head Luo rearranged his expression and said seriously, "Fourth master Wen's words are too humble. As the saying goes, a trip in the sea depends on its captain, I would not know the direction to go if not for your guidance and my hard work would be wasted in that case. Hence, it is obvious that your contribution exceeds mine this time."

Yu Deyi glanced at fourth master Wen, smiled and said, "Fourth master doesn't have to be modest, what station head Luo said is true. As the saying goes, a soldier is limited but a general has more power, there are still many affairs in the station that relies on you to settle."

Fourth master Wen became overjoyed upon hearing this and he stroke his beard with a wide smile on his face.

When the other party sat down again, fourth master Wen asked, "Why has

station head Luo come here today?”

Station head Luo gave a smile and looked towards Yu Deyi, he said, “Its nothing much, there are just some matters in the station that I wish to report to fourth master.”

Yu Deyi took the hint and stood up immediately, he said, “In that case, fourth master, I shall take my leave for now and visit you another day.”

Fourth master Wen raised his hand and said, “It’s alright, Deyi, sit down for now. I still have something to discuss with you. Station head Luo, just talk freely, Deyi is my nephew and part of the martial arts school division so he can be considered as a member of the station. Some things should not be hidden from him, don’t you agree?”

Station head Luo pondered and said, “No problem, this is regarding matters of the station so Yu Deyi should know about them as well.”

Yu Deyi sat back down after hearing this.

Both of them then heard station head Luo said, “This is actually not a large matter, just that the recent job was quite far and it crossed over the New Year. Because the job took a longer time to complete, some people in the escort team whose loyalty is insufficient tried to milk for more benefits and ask for twice the pay, fourth master, don’t you think that this is unreasonable? Their food and accommodation is covered by the station and an allowance is also provided, the station does not short-change its employees yet these people have no conscience. Hence, I gave them a severe scolding and taught them a lesson.”

After speaking up to here, station head Luo paused for a moment, looked at fourth master Wen’s expression and seeing that there was no change, he continued, “But...”

He clenched his teeth as though setting down his determination and said, “But the delivery hand Zhang Xiaohu whom you appointed as my deputy thought that he has become the deputy station head and got other people to address him as that, and because for his own selfishness, he gathered several of the delivery hands and bodyguards to pressure me to step down and raise their pay. Don’t you think that short-sighted people like this who only knows how to care for the people in his circle are underserving of leadership positions?”

Fourth master Wen's face changed slightly but he continued to speak in an unaffected tone, "Mm, if this is so, I shall look for Zhang Xiaohu later on and give him a good talk. The reason for appointing him as your deputy is to assist you so that the job will go on smoothly, such mutinous behaviour is definitely not acceptable."

Station head Luo smiled obligingly and said, "Fourth master Wen is far-sighted, my thoughts are precisely for the sake of the station. Oh right, there was another problem."

Fourth master said, "It is fine, just say it all out."

Station head Luo recounted the matter of meeting Zhang Xiaohua in the little town that was close to the sea and his instruction to separate the accounts for Zhang Xiaohua's living expenses, and then said, "Fourth master Wen, don't you think that I was tight? This Zhang Xiaohu's younger brother is not part of our station so why do we allow him to take advantage of the station's finances? And when I went over to the accounts room yesterday, I found out that this Zhang Xiaohu threw my words up to the ninth wind and the accounts room did not receive a single cent from him, do you think he is still deserving of being my deputy? When he ignored my words to put the station's affairs ahead of his personal interest?"

Fourth master Wen pondered and said to Yu Deyi, "Deyi-ah, go call Zhang Xiaohua over so I can interrogate him personally."

Upon hearing this, station head Luo hurriedly raised his hands and said, "Fourth master, there is no need to raise the flag and sound the drums, I am only chatting casually with you."

Fourth master Wen said to Yu Deyi, "Go call him over but do not explain the reason for so."

He turned to station head Luo and said, "What you said clearly demonstrated your sincere feelings towards the station. The brothers in our escort station should help to correct each other's mistakes, so if Zhang Xiaohu had made an error, I would definitely not punish him half-heartedly."

Not long later, Zhang Xiaohu followed Yu Deyi as they entered fourth master Wen's room, and he became puzzled when he saw station head Luo inside as

well. He greeted everyone before sitting down on the chair closest to the door as instructed.

After Zhang Xiaohu sat down, fourth master Wen looked at him and asked, “Zhang Xiaohu, it must not be easy being the deputy of station head Luo for this job, you have done well. However, I have two matters that I need to clarify with you, you must answer them well and honestly.”

Zhang Xiaohu nodded and said, “Yes, fourth master, please ask away.”

Fourth master Wen nodded slightly and said, “Were there people in the escort team who asked for twice the compensation during the job? Did you represent them to demand for it?”

Zhang Xiaohu was stunned, he thought secretly, “Haven’t I informed you about this matter when I came back?”

When he saw station head Luo lowered his head and drank his tea, realization dawned on him and he said, “Fourth master Wen, it went like this. The job this time was much farther than usual and required us to stay outside the city over the New Year, the people in the escort team were unhappy as they all missed their families. Moreover, the prices were higher because it was a holiday, so not just some but all of the people hoped that the station would provide larger remuneration, such as twice or thrice the amount of pay during that period. There were afraid that station head Luo would reject their proposal because there was a lack of precedence so they discussed it first with me. I felt that thrice the pay might be difficult but double their pay could be considered so I discussed it with station head Luo. Station head Luo did not agree at that time and he told me to discuss it with you, but I was busy when I came back and forgot about it. If you did not raise it today, I would have really let down our brothers’ expectations.”

When fourth master Wen heard Zhang Xiaohu’s reply, he smiled and said, “It must be really difficult for the brothers in the station to travel so far so such a request is reasonable. I can understand how you all feel but this matter will still need to be discussed among the higher ups in the station. It is inappropriate for me to reply now but I should be able to provide a satisfactory answer soon.”

Station head Luo and Zhang Xiaohu nodded, and even though their responses

were the same, their thoughts were completely opposite of each other!

Fourth master Wen nodded in satisfaction and hesitated for a moment before continuing to speak, “Also, Zhang Xiaohu, station head Luo raised the matter of your younger brother joining the escort team to travel. He suggested that your younger brother pay for his living expenses separately, what do you think of this idea?”

Zhang Xiaohu was surprised when he heard this, he said in a curious tone, “About this, when station head Luo requested that my younger brother pay his living expenses separately, I thought that my younger brother could live under the same room as me and save on the accommodation expenses. As for the food expenses, I have already passed it to the bookkeeper and if station head Luo thinks it is not enough and require me to pay the accommodation expenses as well, I will definitely comply with his wishes. As a member of the escort station, it is my duty to follow its rules and regulations.”

“What is this, I asked the accounts room yesterday and you did not pay them at all.” Station head Luo spoke out casually.

Fourth master Wen wrinkled his brow, the reason for his hesitation earlier was because he was reluctant to raise the matter of Zhang Xiaohu. If the matter was discussed, it would bring in Huanxi mountain villa. However, since station head Luo had raised the matter, not bringing it up would show his bias towards Zhang Xiaohu. Since Zhang Xiaohu said that he had already paid the money, he immediately felt that station head Luo was too muddleheaded and had jealous motives, and when compared to Zhang Xiaohu’s behaviour, he was like mud dragging the clouds.

Hence, he turned back to Yu Deyi and said, “Nephew Deyi, I would need to trouble you again to call over the bookkeeper from the accounts room.”

Yu Deyi smiled and said, “No problem, fourth master, I shall leave right away.”

Not long later, the bookkeeper from the accounts room followed Yu Deyi as they entered fourth master Wen’s room. The bookkeeper immediately felt strange when he saw the people in the room, he stood at a side after greeting them and asked, “May I know why fourth master had called for me?”

Fourth master Wen smiled and said, “There is a matter I need you to verify,

you only need to tell the truth without trying to shield either party.”

Upon hearing this, the bookkeeper glances curiously at station head Luo and Zhang Xiaohua before nodding in understanding.

Fourth master Wen asked, “Zhang Xiaohu said that he had already paid his younger brother’s living expenses to you, is this true?”

The bookkeeper immediately understood the situation and replied, “Yes, it is true.”

Station head Luo almost stood up anxiously but fourth master saw his response and raised his hand to stop him, he continued to ask, “So why it is not reflected in the accounts side?”

The bookkeeper smiled as he explained, “It’s like this, fourth master. Zhang Xiaohua gave me the money early in the morning on the day of his return, but I had many urgent personal businesses to settle first so I asked for a few days leave and only returned back to the station today. The money has already been entered into the accounts, fourth master can verify this personally if he wishes.”

Station head Luo’s face turned into the colour of dirt when he heard this, he muttered under his breath, “Just accept your guilt willingly if you have personal matters, why couldn’t you enter the amount into the books before returning?”

Fourth master Wen overheard this, he wrinkled his brows and asked, “Then it is your fault, why couldn’t you enter the amount into the books before taking leave?”

The bookkeeper immediately defended his innocence, he said, “Fourth master, it is not that I did not want to do the accounts properly. I have been meticulous in calculating the expenses and have submitted them before returning home. However, Zhang Xiaohu’s younger brother is only a child and his expenses did not amount to much, the total sum did not exceed a silver. But since the sum had to be settled, I naturally could not compromise on Zhang Xiaohu’s interests so I added the figures carefully this morning and entered them into the books just not long ago. Hence, there is still ten coppers that I have yet to return to Zhang Xiaohu.”

After finishing his sentence, he took out a few coins from his breast and passed

it to Zhang Xiaohu, and the latter extended his hand to receive it without hesitation.

Fourth master Wen's face changed colour when he heard this, and just as he was about to speak, the sounds of footsteps appeared from outside his door. When fourth master Wen peered through the door, he saw Huanxi mountain villa's Qiu Tong who had arrived.

Fourth master Wen hurriedly stood up and went over to welcome the visitor, he greeted, "Lady Qiu Tong, why did you come over to the station today? Such a rare visit indeed."

Qiu Tong smiled and said, "Fourth master Wen is too courteous, I am only a maid from Huanxi mountain villa and do not deserve such an honour."

Fourth master Wen smiled and said, "Lady Qiu Tong is too modest, who doesn't know that Qiu Tong's words cannot be dragged by nine horses in Huanxi mountain villa, and apart from the villa master, everyone needs to listen to your instructions?"

Qiu Tong replied, "This is due to the villa master's influence, there is no other meaning to it."

Fourth master Wen invited Qiu Tong into the room.

After Qiu Tong entered the room, she wrinkled her brows upon seeing the people inside and asked, "Is fourth master Wen busy tight now? Shall I come back a while later?"

Fourth master Wen smiled obligingly and said, "It's no problem, the matter is already settled. Lady Qiu Tong can sit down first while I order them to leave."

Upon hearing this, Qiu Tong did not hesitate and looked at the surrounding people. Her eyes brightened when she saw Zhang Xiaohu and sat down beside him.

When fourth master Wen saw that Qiu Tong had seated, he said to everyone else, "I have clarified my doubts about this living expenses issue. I have another matter here so you all can go back first and wait for my further instructions later."

Everyone stood up upon hearing his instructions.

However, they heard Qiu Tong saying, “Please do not leave.”